Table of Contents

1. Book One of The Ronin Saga
2. Chapter One
3. Chapter Two
4. Chapter Three
5. Chapter Four
6. Chapter Five
7. Chapter Six
8. Chapter Seven
9. Chapter Eight
10. Chapter Nine
11. Chapter Ten
12. Chapter Eleven
13. Chapter Twelve
14. Chapter Thirteen
15. Chapter Fourteen
16. Chapter Fifteen
17. Chapter Sixteen
18. Chapter Seventeen
19. Chapter Eighteen
20. Chapter Nineteen
21. Chapter Twenty
22. Chapter Twenty-One
23. Chapter Twenty-Two
24. Chapter Twenty-Three
25. Chapter Twenty-Four
26. Chapter Twenty-Five
27. Chapter Twenty-Six
28. Chapter Twenty-Seven
29. Chapter Twenty-Eight
30. Chapter Twenty-Nine

Book One of The Ronin Saga

[image]

When legends come to life the world trembles from a single name. Ronin. Once-heroes from a different age, they wield elemental powers… wind, water, fire, stone, forest, sun, moon, flesh, and metal.

At the same time, a young man discovers his best friend with a sword in her stomach, and dark wings sprouting from her back. Guards rush onto the scene, accuse him of the act, and he is forced to flee. In a new world without his memories, Gray must find his way amid legends and darkness, as he wrestles with an elemental power inside himself.

A power all too similar to the infamous Ronin…

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"**This is one of those books where you pick it up and you get**

sucked into that ultimate time wrap... and suddenly you realize you've not done anything in the last hours and hours and the book is ending and you really don't want it to, but you CAN'T stop reading it!" - *Blogger* Jesse Kimmel-Freeman

For all things Ronin, and to buy the book visit:
www.roninsaga.com

Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/The-Knifes-Edge-Ronin-ebook/dp/B00CAWXIPU/

Read on and join the world of The Ronin... I hope you enjoy!

-Matt

Chapter One

Dedication
To my devoted editor, friend, and all around rock—my mom.

THE RETURN

Kirin ran. Using the tooth of the battlement as a stepping-stone, he launched himself at Ren. Blade arcing, he landed in Water Upon the Rocks, an attack from above. Steel clanged as metal sparked, and his muscles strained against his master's parry.

Ren's thin lips curved into a smile, making his peppered beard rustle. "Keep that up and you'll have my title before long."

Eyeing him through the mesh of their swords, Kirin smirked. "It's all yours."

Immediately, he realized his mistake, but it was too late. His pressure waned as his concentration slipped. Ren's heavy biceps flexed. Kirin was blown back as if by a gust of wind, feet scraping along the gray stone. He threw a leather boot to the ground in a Low Moon stance, his knees bent and back straight. At the same time, he tossed a hand to the rampart's wall. His palms scraped the stone merlons and he skidded to a halt. He looked up. Ren's sword hurtled towards his face. Pressing against the ground, he vaulted backwards, diving beneath the blade's tip. Landing on the balls of his feet, he peered through his brown hair.

Ren rose to his full, impressive height. Despite the chill in the air, the man was bare- chested, wearing only a pair of frayed brown pants with leather strings. His frame was tanned dark from the unforgiving sun. A long scar ran diagonally across his chest. A few more white lines marred his shoulders and arms. There was not a scrap of fat on him. Lit by the dawning sun, Ren stood in High Moon. His back leg was heavily bent, holding the majority of his weight, while his front foot rested lightly upon the ground. It was a

stance most could learn, but few could ever master.

Kirin rose. “You tricked me.”

Ren broke High Moon. Sword tip to the stone, he leaned on his pommel, lounging. He was beginning to lose his hair, pate wearing thin, but what was left was plaited back into a komai tail, a black and gray braid of traditional Devari code, but far longer in accordance to his rank. “Don’t listen to me then, or, better yet, don’t talk back. Besides, you should know my tools by now—tools which a blademaster should always have at his disposal.”

He scoffed. “Tools? They are clearly tricks and you know it.” His palms stung and he saw peeled callouses, raw and pink, like a shaved beet. “And why do I always seem to get hurt around you?”

Ren shrugged innocently. “Not sure, I don’t get hurt.”

There was a subtle shift in the air, and Kirin focused, becoming acutely aware of his surroundings. Sharpening his senses at will was a skill of the Devari harnessed over years of intense training. Ramparts, crenulated towers, and scaled rooftops surrounded him. What he felt was the guard changing as hundreds of fresh bodies were beginning their first patrol of the day.

He embraced the Leaf, using his Ki. Suddenly, his veins chilled. He stood inside a soldier’s cold limbs, felt his stiff joints, and heavy lids from recently shed dreams. The man excused another tired soul to the hard sacks of the barracks. With a breath, Kirin retreated from the guard’s body, flowing back into his own.

What I wouldn’t do for a soft pillow. He envied them, for a Devari never slept more than several hours. But deep down, he did not envy their softness, or at least, he would not trade for it. Brushing the dirt from his black tunic and brown pants, he regained his feet and raised his sword. But Ren was looking away, gazing over the bailey’s walls. Something weighed heavily on his master’s features. There were shadows in the man’s eyes. “Is it true?” he asked.

“Rumors are rumors, Kirin. Besides, you should not concern yourself with prophecy. As Devari, we are above such things.”

“You’re avoiding the question. I want to know, is it true they are back?” “Say their name lad. Only a fool fears a name.”
“I can’t…”
“Then I’ll say it for you.”

“Don’t—”

“Ronin,” Ren said, interrupting him.

Kirin’s breath caught. He looked behind. The rampart was empty and he breathed a sigh. Though he knew the guards would not disturb Devari training and they were safe from prying ears, to speak their name aloud was a crime punishable by death.

“It’s only you and me up here, Kirin. And as for your question, I’ve outlasted a hundred false returns, each one more absurd than the last. Though a false return is nothing to smile about. Each causes its share of pandemonium. I’ve seen hangings, riots, even full-scale wars at the hands of a false return.” The man was holding something back.

“But I’m not asking about rumors. Though I have heard them all… whispers that the elvin prophet is on her deathbed, that the Patriarch is to decree this coming as a True Return, that Taer and Maldon are shutting their doors to outsiders completely.”

“Taerians have always been a foolish, superstitious lot, and Maldians follow on their heels like a trotting dog,“ Ren said contemptuously, “and I don’t know what you’ve been hearing, but the Patriarch has uttered no such thing.”

He continued undaunted, “All of Farhaven’s magical creatures are fleeing to their sanctuaries. The whole Citadel is in an uproar. Things I’d have to be blind to miss. I’m not asking if something is happening, Ren. I know something is happening. I’m asking what you think.”

Ren turned, looking away. He was silent so long Kirin didn’t think he was going to answer. At last, he spoke, “This time, something seems different. I feel there is a deadly sliver of truth within the rumors. After two-thousand years, I fear the Return has come.”

The Return... The phrase alone was even more terrifying than Ren's fear. But the feeling of dread in the Citadel of late had been palpable, nothing short of the Return seemed likely. "The Gates separate Farhaven from Daerval and the enemy has never crossed the Gates, right Ren?"

"Farhaven is safe, lad," Ren said. "Don't you worry."

Kirin looked out over the Citadel's curtain wall in thought. He saw the courtyards with sculpted shrubbery. The baileys were filled with winding stone paths, training dummies, and rows of haystacks. The morning bell tolled, announcing Neophytes to their daily duties. Out over the Citadel, its field of towers, and heavily fortified keeps was a magnificent city; and where the sun beat back the mist, it revealed pockets of the land below.

He saw dirt streets. From this height the people looked like colored ants. To Kirin, the city was an awning that covered the land, reaching into the dunes of the Reliahs Desert. It was the great desert city of Farbs, Kingdom of Fire. It was truly breathtaking. Often he wished he could leave the walls and walk among the people. But such a thing was not possible for a Devari.

"Wake up!" Ren bellowed, and he was glad to sees the years had shed from Ren's face. His master's stance switched from High Moon to Low Moon, one leg sweeping back. Kirin saw his opening, but kept his face blank. "So are you going to sight-see, or for once are you going to actually hit..."

He didn't let Ren finish and charged with a fierce cry, sword raised for Heron in the Reeds. Ren smiled as if he were waiting for it, blade flickering into Full Moon, covering his head. In the last moment, Kirin gathered his meager power. Using the element of moon, he summoned a blanket of darkness and flung it before him like a black shield. It was a weak and dismal spell, but it was enough. His cry pitched and he dove through the shield. Ren's sword appeared from nowhere, but he rolled beneath the man's blade. As he landed, he twisted. Fisher in the Shallows. He lashed at Ren's legs, ready to retract the blow in victory. Ren had lost. Elation lanced through him. Abruptly, his master smirked and his hand smacked a hidden block of stone.

A sphere of dark purple appeared from thin air, hovering between them. The liquid darkness swiftly expanded. It touched his outstretched arm and he recoiled, but it was no use. His muscles twitched as if suffocated in stone, and the darkness swiftly slid over him like a second skin.

The world turned black as night. Kirin was weightless and falling.

Chapter Two

THE SEVEN TRIALS

Vera inhaled the incense that burned in the brightly lit room. On any other day she would complain about its putrid sting as she walked past the Oval Hall, watching as people flocked towards the great chamber.

Today, however, the incense smelled sweet.

Her face glistened with sweat. Seven women surrounded her. Each stood on one of the seven points of the Star of Magha, set in the white marble floor with gold veins. Each point stood for one of the elements of the Great Kingdoms. She stood on the red flame of the Citadel.

All the elements were present, but one. The forbidden element of wind.

The women surrounding her breathed heavily, wearing looks of loathing. They fear what they don't understand. She took in their stares and noted their different strengths. Merian stood on the emblem of flesh, Sara, water, Tamiko, earth, Resa, sun, Eliwyn, fire, and the others she did not know. The only thing they shared was that they were years older than her, and nearly all of them despised her.

With a portion of the spark, Vera twisted a strand of water with a thicker thread of light. Any trace of dampness was sucked from her dress, like poison drawn from a wound as gray wool was simultaneously straightened and smoothed. Immediately, pain jolted her as if a small firework erupted within her brain. She gasped and fell to her knees. Looking up, she saw Merian had snapped the link tight.

The link was a connection of visible gold between her and the others, like a wagon-

wheel's spokes, stemming from Merian. For that mere moment, the link between all eight women glowed brightly. The other women gave Merian curious, if not entirely disapproving looks. All except one. Eliywn looked at Vera with sympathy. It was well known that the use of pain outside each individual Trial was strictly prohibited.

"Do not use the spark during the Trials for anything but the Trials themselves," Merian snapped. "At least not until we are done with you." The woman's lips pursed, as if she were thinking up something truly cruel to say. "And I would save your energy if I were you. You will need every morsel you can conjure in the next Trial, or you will fail miserably."

Vera brushed her fall of auburn hair behind her ears and rose to her full height. There was a fire in Merian she had not seen until now, and she nearly applauded the woman for showing her backbone at last. Then she eyed Merian's red robes. The robes of a Reaver. She looked around the room at each woman. Each bore the robes of a full Reaver, a title she craved to hold more than air.

"Neophyte Vera, you have completed the Sixth Trial. The final Seventh Trial will begin now," Merian quoted line for line.

With the veil of obedience, Vera smiled. "As you wish, Reaver Merian." Each woman looked like coiled desrah snakes ready to strike. She grinned, inviting it, and together, the women attacked.

Spokes of light flew forth, striking from all sides. She threw up her hands, erecting a shield of light. The spokes of light moved through her shield like water, racing towards her. Too strong. Seven Reavers could not be bested by any but an Arbiter in a match of raw power. The Seventh Trial was not one of strength, but a test of spirit. It was not meant to be won. But she was not done.

Vera summoned a shield of darkness and it launched from her fingertips, spreading in the air. Her gaze narrowed like an arrow's sight on Merian whose eyes blazed with hatred. She unleashed her bottled power with a scream, uncaging the tendrils of living darkness, but in the last minute wove threads of moon to disguise the power's dark form. The light and darkness collided with a powerful crash and an earth-shaking clap rattled the room. The bars

evaporated like mist. But in the moment before their collapse, the darkness funneled up the spoke of light and sunk its teeth into the wielder of the link.

The thunderclap of air blew the women back.

Slowly, the women rose to their feet. A foul smell like burnt hair hung in the air, but no others seemed to notice. At her feet, Vera saw fragments of colored glass from the windows high above, and shreds of priceless tapestries depicting grand scenes of the Lieon, the Great War.

Resa, a bull-like woman, spoke, “Never has the test of light been countered with a shield of moon. Moon is the weaker of the two elements, but somehow it worked. Truly remarkable and worth the coming ceremony. You are now the youngest to pass the Seven Trials in history. Congratulations, Reaver Vera.”

“Congratulations,” the other six said, their voices a single hum from the Link.

“Merian, sound the chime,” Resa ordered. “It is complete, the Citadel must know. The ceremonies must commence.” She hadn’t noticed. Neither had the others. There was a stark silence. Vera smirked, reveling in their confusion. The seven women’s eyes widened in sudden recognition, their feelings connected through the link. As one they looked to Merian.

The woman knelt, her wide-eyes brimming in horror. “My power is gone!” the woman shrieked, and gave a bloody cry.

“Merian!” The women swarmed around her, dropping the golden glow of the link.

Resa touched the sister’s forehead and recoiled with a gasp. “I cannot heal her. It is far beyond my skill.” She grabbed Tamiko. “Take her to an Arbiter and quickly. Perhaps they can grab the spark before it recedes too far.”

“She... it’s gone? But how?” Tamiko stuttered.

Vera smiled at the woman’s shock. Like a wide-eyed doll. She

always thought Tamiko's hair and face too done up to be attractive, though most of the men of the Citadel didn't seem to mind.

"Stop asking questions and go!" Resa yelled. Tamiko bolted to get help and Resa turned. The woman's eyed blazed. Come to me, Vera beckoned. Resa rose, moving towards her. Her heavy steps reminded Vera of a cerabul before the charge, or one of the Devari guards stalking postures, which made her think of Kirin. Behind the woman Vera saw others. Curious and fearful Neophytes flowed into the room, faces pale from the sound of Merian's chilling scream. Eliywn rushed to Vera's side. Resa approached and Eliywn straightened to her fullest height, which was a hand or two shorter than Vera.

Before Resa could speak Eliywn proclaimed in a rush, "She did nothing against the law of the Citadel, and she obviously didn't mean—"

"Leave," Resa seethed.

Eliywn bristled as if slapped, and she looked ready to respond. The girl knows not when to quit. Ignoring Resa's direct order would meet with serious punishment, for Reaver of three stripes vastly outranked Eliywn's one. She touched her friend's arm. Eliywn frowned, but understood, and grudgingly took her leave.

"What was that?" Resa whispered, breathing fire. The woman's body practically shook with desire to hurt Vera, likely not even with the spark, but with pure, animal-like rage. She would... thought Vera calmly.

"What was what?"

The spacious hall filled with Neophytes and Reavers, rushing to see the cause of the uproar and whispers spread like fire.

"Heresy," Resa sputtered. "Merian might die, if she doesn't, the spark inside her is shriveled and likely the spark is gone from her forever! You desiccated her!"

The word gave Vera chills. Desiccating meant being deprived and

cut from the spark, like a still beating heart carved from one's chest. For a Reaver, it was a word far worse than any curse.

Vera returned the woman's wrathful glare with a small smile. Words would clearly not affect some women, she knew, no matter how profound. Resa snatched Vera's robes. "If I ever, ever see anything like that again, Citadel law or not, I will personally pluck your haughty eyes from your head, without the spark."

I was right. Vera dipped her head, casting her eyes downward. "Apologies, Reaver Resa. My power went beyond me," she lied. "I will learn to control it." That much was truth.

Resa's meaty fist rose, ready to strike. At last, with an unattractive snarl, she turned and stalked out of the chambers, following the two women who held the muttering, half- conscious Merian on a cloth stretcher.

And for a brief moment, she felt a note of pity. No one should suffer that fate... She would take a thousand deaths before she would take a life without the spark. Ignoring the eyes of others, Vera pushed her way through the whispering crowds of Neophytes, heading to her quarters.

Chapter Three

The Neophyte Palace

The corridor shook with the peal of tower bells, announcing the completion of the Seven Trials. Vera ground her teeth in irritation and turned the corner swiftly, running headlong into a figure. She rubbed her arm, looking up to see the worried frown of Enise, a bookish Neophyte.

“I’m so sorry, are you all right?” Enise asked.

The girl looked every bit like a startled bird—sharp nose, spiky fray of white hair like plumage, which was even more frayed and bristly than normal, and bright, wide eyes. Enise was one of the few who didn’t loathe Vera. She wondered if the girl had never heard the rumors. Either way, she liked Enise.

“I’m fine Enise. It was my fault.”

“No no, it’s mine, I know I shouldn’t read and walk, Ali—err, Reaver Aliye always yells at me for it.” Enise fell to her knees, gathering up the fallen volumes.

Vera knelt at her side and helped, noticing the faded gold titles. The Last Reliquaries of Tremwar. Accounts of the Final Battles of the Kimon. Tales of the Great Schism. The Battle of Gal, Letters of a General. The Kyomen Wars, and a dictionary on Yorin, the old tongue. “Quite the collection. Brushing up on your history?”

Enise blushed nervously. “Just a little reading. Ethelwin—I mean, Reaver Ethelwin lectured briefly on the betrayal and how they destroyed the world. She explained their heresy, but even as a girl I knew of their betrayal. Yet even back then I felt something was missing, but it was smaller, like an itch I couldn’t scratch. Then yesterday, during Ethelwin’s speech, I felt the itch grow. And I knew something was truly wrong with the stories.”

“You’re talking about the Ronin,” Vera said.

Enise’s gaze flickered to either end of the hall. “Vera! You can’t say that name.”

“I’ve gotten in enough trouble today, what else can they do?”

“They’ll hang you. You know that.”

“No one will hear,” she said. “Have you found anything yet?”

The girl sighed. “Not yet. Just the same history we all know. It’s strange, but it seems as if even these old things are missing pieces.” Enise shook her head as if coming to her senses. “I really shouldn’t be talking of this. Wait, why were you in such a hurry?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Vera glanced upward.

“You passed!” Enise exclaimed. “Congratulations! When are the ceremonies? Are you going to—”

Vera wasn’t listening as two Devari passed, moving with deadly grace. Where many men dared to eye her slender form and perfect curves, the Devari’s attention never wavered, eyes on their destination. She looked back. Enise was still talking. “Enise,” she interrupted, “if you see Kirin, can you tell him I’m looking for him? I’ll be in my room if he asks.” She thrust the books into the girl’s arms and left her kneeling wide- eyed.

She moved through the halls until she reached the grand antechamber of the Neophyte Palace. Hundreds of Neophytes swarmed the broad floor, rushing to chores or lectures. In the center of the room was a grand staircase, each step large enough for a small house to sit comfortably upon.

Feeling too exposed, Vera took the staircase swiftly. Above was a dome with a series of large windows. Between each window were huge portraits of the Arbiters. Only five Arbiters had ever been born, and each lived for thousands of years. It was said their lifespan was due to the power of the spark they held, for the weakest Arbiter was stronger than a hundred Reavers working together with a link. The thought of such power made her knees

weak and she glanced to the painting of the man in grand flowing robes of gold and white. The Patriarch. He was the oldest and strongest of all the Arbiters and Guardian of the Citadel. There had only ever been one Arbiter to hold the mantle of Patriarch in all time. The man was a legend.

Suddenly she spotted a familiar face. Evalyn, tall, buxom, and never two steps away from her pet Rosalyn. She hated Evalyn. The girl was admittedly beautiful, and powerful too, but she used others to no end. No to mention, Evalyn had an obvious taste for Kirin, which put a sour taste in Vera's mouth. So she was glad to see Evalyn turn the corner towards the courtyards.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she took a crowded hallway when a presence ripped her breath from her lungs. At the end of the hall, a tall man walked briskly towards her. All others in the crowded corridor seemed to disappear. Despite his simple brown robes and gray cape with a flaring collar, he filled the corridor with his presence. His eyes fell on her. Despite all her confidence and power, in that moment, Vera felt like a shriveled weed beneath his foot.

Arbiter Ezrah.

What is he doing down here? Arbiters kept to themselves, rarely seen beyond the restricted upper halls of the Citadel where great magic resided.

Ezrah passed, lips moving soundlessly. Something touched her. Vera felt a chill as if dunked in ice water. Suddenly, the tolling of bells was absent. There was only silence and Ezrah's quiet mumbling. A spell... she realized. Ezrah quickly passed, taking the bubble of silence with him as he turned the corner. She took a breath and the others in the hall came back into her awareness. Neophytes and Reavers whispered in fear and awe at having seen an Arbiter.

She left them, knowing what awaited her.

Today, Vera would unlock the sword's true power. Today, she would surpass the limits of a mere Reaver.

Chapter Four

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Still moving, Kirin hit the ground. Instinctively, he tucked and rolled on the hard dirt. He came to a stop and his stomach churned, the world spinning.

The ramparts were gone, as if evaporated. The stone was now replaced with hard earth, and he felt bits of gravel between his nails. On his left, a stone's throw away, a group of girls in gray dresses sat on a grassy knoll shaded by old silveroot trees. The trees' glossy bark glistened like a fish's scaled belly. They listened attentively to an older woman in scarlet robes, who wove luminescent green strands of nature between her hands like a seamstress—as she did, a silveroot's nearest branch miraculously lengthened, bending to touch her outstretched palm. Elsewhere, groups of women roved the grounds, conversing lightly, ignoring his sudden appearance in the middle of the courtyard. To his left, near a stack of barrels, a pair of older Neophytes trained, tossing a large flame steadily between the two.

He recognized it as one of the four courtyards of the Neophyte Palace, where female Neophytes trained. The Palace itself loomed nearby.

"I didn't know there was a transporter there," he told Ren who stood calmly in the center of the courtyard.

Ren shrugged. "I had to do something. That was quite the move. I doubt I would have evaded it. You moved like the wind."

"Not fast enough, but I guess I'll accept the fact that you had to cheat."

Ren gave a burly chuckle. "Speaking of moving like the wind, for a moment there, I thought you weren't moving, but shifting. While the transporters were developed by a hundred Reavers using the

Link, it is nothing compared to the Ronin's abilities. The Ronin could teleport at will, and not just to one designated area like a transporter, but anywhere. They called it shifting. Quite the ability."

Kirin scratched his head. "That'd make sense if I could harness the spark more than a trickle, Ren. A rock has as much natural ability as I do."

"No. A rock can probably harness more of the spark than you."

"Thanks."

"... but you, Kirin, have raw ability."

"With the sword, maybe," he replied. The man said nothing. "I've been tested, Ren. Dozens of times, remember?"

Ren shrugged. "The tests have been wrong before."

He narrowed his eyes when he heard a voice call out his name. From the grand arched entry that led into the Palace, Enise, his young friend with a startled fray of white- blond hair, charged down the wide steps.

Enise approached. "Kirin—"

He steadied the girl with a hand. "It's all right, slow down. What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Listen!" Enise put a hand to her ear.

The sounds of the bells hit him like a hammer's blow. "She passed!" He grabbed Enise's hands and danced in a circle, sending her into a fit of laughter. "I can't believe it," he said. "The youngest Reaver in all of history." And he felt as if those bells chimed for both of them, for he never thought he would live to see this day.

Looking back, he vividly remembered passing through the giant black gates of the Citadel as an orphan. Tired, hungry and on the verge of death, he had entered a world he had always feared. A place rumored to be full of the most powerful wielders of the spark, behind cloud-scraping black walls. He could still remember the feel of his pounding heart as he took in the Citadel. It gleamed like a vast gem of obsidian, the red- robed men and women demanding respect just short of kings. Since then, he had been tested in every way to get to where he stood now, and those chiming bells were a testament to their triumph.

“She wants to see you,” Enise said.

He turned to Ren. “Master, I know I’m training, but…”

The man laughed and waved him away. “I’m done with you for now. The girl is waiting. Go to the Oval Hall and celebrate, and tell her congratulations from me.”

“She’s not in the Oval Hall,” Enise said. “She left.”

“Wait, she’s not staying for the ceremonies?” He knew Vera wasn’t one for fanfare, but this was the Trials! She had been dreaming of this moment since they were big enough to don the smallest of gray robes. “Why?”

Enise shrugged. “All I know is she was headed for her rooms in a hurry.”

“Then to her rooms I go. Rekdala Forhas,” he spoke solemnly.

“Till honor and death my friend,” Ren mirrored.

“Will I see you at the Patriarch’s meeting?”

Ren rubbed his jaw. “You will. He wants me there, as well as the Commander of the Citadel Guard, and all other Captains, though I’m not sure why.” He shook the oddity off. “Until tonight then.”

“Until then.” Kirin ran out of the courtyard and vaulted up the stairs. Halfway up the marble steps, he brushed the shoulder of a girl fast approaching from the other way, and a flush of fear flashed

through him. He nearly stumbled with the sudden disturbance to his Ki. A dark feeling pressed against his heart as the midday torches along the walls sputtered. He looked back, but the girl had disappeared.

Ahead, something was coming.

** *

The Palace was vaulted and filled with skylights that let in shafts of morning light. Women walked quietly among hundreds of shallow pools, weaving through a sea of ivory pillars. Hundreds knelt in prayer.

Kirin turned the corner and a woman stood before him. He was two-hands taller than her, but somehow he felt the shorter of the two. Evalyn's chest heaved from running. He admitted it was not an unattractive sight in the least. She was well built, with slender shoulders, a slim waist, and a pretty face. The problem was she knew it all too well.

"Hello to you too, Kirin," she said with an arrogant twist to her lips.

"Morning," he said, and turned to the girl tucked behind the woman, "Morning Rosyaln." Rosyaln was pretty and smart. Sadly, she was Evalyn's shadow. Rosyaln smiled in return. Evalyn looked behind, and the girl's smile became a frown. Kirin sighed. "I don't have time for you this morning, Evalyn. I'd love to stay and chat, but if you'll excuse me I was just on my way..."

"To see Vera," Evayln interjected. "I heard there was an accident, do you know what happened?"

"An accident?"

"That's what I heard. I do hope she is all right," Evalyn said then lowered her voice to a whisper, "I even heard that someone was desiccated in the process..."

A flush of fear shot through him. "Was it Vera?" Kirin strode forward and gripped Evalyn's arm.

The girl looked taken aback, her bravado gone. “I’m—I’m not certain. I only heard someone was,” she said, and then winced. “Kirin, you’re hurting me.” He let go and moved around her, sprinting through the halls. He prayed it wasn’t Vera. What would Vera do? She always said she couldn’t live without her power... He knew it wasn’t an idle threat. Reaching his room, his senses flared. He touched the door’s warm handle. It sent a tremor up his arm. Then, as quickly as it came it was gone. Without a second thought, he opened it.

He froze.

Black tentacles hung in the air. Then he saw her.

Vera knelt in the center of the room, hunched as if hurt. From her back, the darkness expanded, unfurling like black wings. Kirin’s grip tightened on the door’s handle and he moved to free her when his Ki shouted in warning. As the dark feelers slithered over the walls, one of the black tentacles touched a nearby dresser and it snapped like dry tinder.

Kirin’s mind reeled. Suddenly, a frigid numbness shot through his body. He looked to his feet. An inky darkness pooled around his boots. His limbs refused to move as the darkness crawled over him. He pulled, but the darkness only slithered faster. It clawed higher, touching his thigh, reaching out like liquid hands. He opened his mind, picturing the leaf, and as he had been trained, he threw his rising fear into the floating leaf. He took a slow, heavy step. One leg at a time, he pushed forward as the dark hands crawled higher, until he reached Vera.

Her skin was pale. Green and blue veins spidered across her features. More veins pulsed in her slender neck like thick, tangled roots. She’s still alive. He held onto the thought like a drowning man. Quelling his terror, he grabbed Vera. Then he saw it. A blade protruded from her back, buried to its hilt within her stomach. His fingers clenched on her robes, and he gagged as warm blood poured over his hands. He touched the sword and pain shot through his arm, bursting inside his skull. His vision went black. But he held on, pulling the sword from her gut. Vera let out a gurgled cough. At the same time, he felt the darkness reach his torso. His vision cleared

and he saw the dark tentacles now engulfed the room.

Voices sounded and the door blew open. Five men entered. Two wore shining plate —palace guards—and the other three wore dark brown leather and black mail. Devari, his brothers. Then he saw Ren. The man stood in the doorway, eyes wide, and sword raised. He realized every blade was directed at him. Glancing to the sword in his own hand, covered in Vera's blood, he put the two together. "It wasn't me!" He looked to his master. "Ren, you have to believe me!"

In the air, the tendrils wavered like a black snake waiting to strike.

"I believe you, Kirin, now put down your sword and drop the girl."

"Ren, please, she's dying, you have to help!" he pleaded, raising the frail body in his arms. In his hand, the sword seethed, as if eating at the light in the already dark room.

Ren's expression narrowed. "We will, but first you must drop the sword! Don't you see? Whatever is attached to you and killing Vera stems from that blade. Drop it and we will save Vera." But something felt off to Kirin. The words and the world around seemed fuzzy, as if he was seeing it all through another's eyes, and in his gut, something burned like a fire.

He looked down as Vera's breathing slowed and then stopped. "No..." Something came over him. It flowed from the sword and into him, dark and powerful, plying him with promises. A dark mantle fell upon him, and when he looked up, rage consumed his vision. "Why didn't you help her?" The sword tightened in his grip, and he felt the dark tentacles. He rose to his full height, holding Vera in one arm. The black tendrils that filled the room now sprouted from his back like dark wings.

Upon the ground, the darkness slithered. It neared a guard's boot. Kirin tried to open his mouth, to yell in warning, but nothing came out. The guard shrieked and fell to his knees. The other palace guard watched, torn between his friend's cries and the sword directed at him. His wild eyes settled on Kirin. The man charged with a fierce cry. The darkness was faster. The dark wings from his

back lunged like lightning, perforating the man's head with a fist-sized hole. Then it lifted the guard from the ground like a sack of flour, and flung him to the wall with a sickening thud.

Ren stepped forward, ignoring the pooling darkness. Kirin flinched, something begged the man to stop, to go no further, but his voice was robbed from his throat. "Stop this madness, Kirin!" Ren called. "I know you're in there!"

Kirin railed, hearing the man's voice. Ren took another step, and the dark feelers lifted, coiling. Ren raised his sword and Kirin cried out, but his voice was swallowed—it was no use.

He was lost.

** *

The other palace guard let loose a chilling cry behind Ren.

Ren pivoted. A dark pool had gathered at the man's feet, crawling over his legs and torso, dragging him down. Forgha grabbed the man's outstretched arm, the only thing not seething in liquid darkness. Ren watched, but knew already. The darkness had the man. The guard's grip tightened, screaming for Forgha to hold on, and Ren watched as Forgha strained, groaning as his muscles bunched and knotted, but soon the crawling darkness spread over the arm. Forgha snapped his hand away and just in time, as the darkness encased the guard's head, snuffing his cries. A deathly quiet returned to the room once more. Ren gave a shiver as he turned his attention to the threat before them.

He spoke softly, "This thing, whatever it is, cannot be fought." Ren saw no other way, and he could barely say the words. "We must kill the source."

"How do we get to it?" Mearus asked, sizing the creature that was Kirin.

"You two must distract it. Do not endanger yourselves—merely pull its attention. I will get inside."

"I'll go left," Forgha stated.

Mearus nodded, grip tightening on his curved sword.

“Get to the farthest sides of the room,” Ren instructed, “it will buy you time. Go. Now!”

At his command, the two men moved like stalking wolves, strafing to Kirin’s flanks, all the while watching the living, moving feelers that were suspended in the air, crawling over the stone and consuming the room.

Abruptly, the heavy glass window behind Kirin burst. Instantly, the wing-like feelers on Kirin’s right burst forward with astonishing speed, diving for Mearus. The man dodged, rolling to the left, and the arms smashed through a pile of furniture, raising a shower of splinters. At the same time, more tentacles shot towards Forgha’s head. He lashed at the darkened limb, cutting it in two. The two halves fell and Ren watched as they writhed upon the ground. Confidence stirred in him.

But then Forgha, all muscle and sinew, let loose a chilling scream. The man’s dark brown eyes bulged inside his skull. Ren watched horrified as the dark liquid poured down the man’s sword, burning like acid, flowing over his muscled arms and turning them to mutilated stumps. Another feeler shot out, ending Forgha’s bloody screams.

Mearus unleashed a fierce cry, diving towards Forgha.

Ren cried out, “Mearus! No!” But it was too late. He cringed as two more feelers bolted towards the man, cutting off his leg above the knee while the other punched a hole through his chest. The man gurgled blood, his eyes turning to Ren in disbelief as he fell to the ground.

Ren looked up, grip tightening on the haft of his sword. “Kirin...” he seethed, eyeing the boy he once knew. “I know this isn’t you. Wake up damn it!” This isn’t you, he repeated the words, wanting to believe them. In the heat of battle, Ren held a tight rein, his emotions locked behind a steel door, but now he felt it all spiraling beyond his control. His arm shook, sword rattling, though not in fear. He knew what he needed to do. If he could avoid the

lightening quick feelers he could do it. He just needed to get in range...

He dashed forward. The feelers shot out, even quicker than before. He dove to the right. The dark limb crashed into the stone, sending powder and stone shards into the air. Ren let out a furious cry, dodging left and right. Two more liquid feelers skinned his torso and arm. Kirin lifted his arms, dropping Vera, and the nightmarish limbs moved quicker, attacking from every angle. Ren's cry pitched, giving into his rage, weaving beneath the limbs. He dove into a swift roll. When he looked up he was inside, only an arm's length away. He lunged forward, and grasped the boy's arms in one mighty grip. He pressed his sword to Kirin's throat.

"Kirin! Wake up, damn it! I know you're in there! Don't make me..." He pressed the blade tighter in the final moment, blood peeling beneath the razor-sharp edge. His muscled arm was ready to cut, to finish it as he knew he should.

The boy's green eyes stared into him, glazed. And Ren realized the boy was gone. Ren took a breath and uttered a final prayer when Kirin's head shook, just a little. Ren opened his mouth and gasped. He looked down. A dark, liquid feeler protruded from his stomach. Ren sputtered, trying to form words but dark, frothy blood came out. He tried to swallow it back, but it was no use as more flowed forth.

Falling, he knew. He knew it as soon as his sword didn't cut. "Kirin..." he sputtered and the darkness consumed him.

** *

Kirin distantly saw Ren fall. All of it came rushing back, as if he were waking from a dark slumber. He saw the room, bathed in blood. It dripped from the ceiling, coating the stone walls and shattered furniture. His mind railed in confusion.

The darkness retreated back into the sword, pulling itself from the four corners of the room and sucking into the blade. The sword glowed for a moment, brighter than a star, then its sheen returned to normal. In the hallway, alarms sounded, echoing throughout the

Neophyte Palace.

At his feet, Vera's corpse lay, blood pooling. Slowly, he backed out of the room. Outside, with the sword in his bloodstained grip, he ran, fleeing to the only safe place he knew.

Chapter Five

An Arbiter's Gift!

Kirin reached the uppermost halls of the Citadel. He had trusted his Ki, as it guided him down corridors restricted to all but the highest-ranking Reavers. Always he heard the guards' footfalls sounding through the Citadel like a broken dam. Twice he felt the presence of Devari. Luckily, they weren't as strong and he sensed them first, instead of the other way around.

At last, he stood before the oak door. He threw it open.

The room was shaped in a curve, fitting to the tower's shape. Inside, he saw gold stands, opulent carpets, Saerian vases, windows with a view of the city, but all of it was a blur in his vision. He rushed towards Ezrah who stood behind his wooden desk.

Kirin opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Ezrah saw his gore-covered hands and moved with unexpected swiftness. A power surrounded the Arbiter like a nimbus, and the flush of white filled the room making the tapestries flutter and knocking stacks of papers off the table. Ezrah touched his temple. Images poured through him in a flash—scenes of everything that had happened until now. At last, his vision raced to this moment, to where he stood. He gasped and pulled away.

"Light and flesh..." Ezrah cursed, and grasped his shoulders. "You... you have to leave, my boy, at once." He whisked towards his desk, and more papers and tomes showered to the floor as he flung them aside in search.

Kirin opened his mouth, his breath returned in a rush, but he could barely inhale before the next exhale fell.

"You're going to faint, you must slow your breathing," Ezrah instructed as he opened and slammed drawers with the flick of his

finger.

“I—I can’t,” he gasped. His grandfather returned and put another finger to the side of his head. His breathing slowed, but his mind didn’t—it reeled in fear, anger, denial, confusion, and a thousand other emotions. Yet one thing was clear, and it overrode all else. “I killed them all... I killed Ren,” he whispered in horror, eyeing the blood on his hands and arms. Vera’s blood.

“You did not kill them, Kirin. It did.” Ezrah pointed to the sword. Kirin dropped the blade as if it burned. The blade clattered on the stone floor. “This you must trust, it was not your fault. Always remember that.”

“How could I possibly forget what I’ve done?”

“Soon you will not remember this, but you deserve to know what has begun this night. Many years ago, when I was still but a Neophyte, I stumbled across a book of prophecy. I later discovered, to my horror, that what I held was the prophecy that foretold of the true Return that would tear the world asunder.”

A cold seeped beneath Kirin’s skin. The true Return was a story that scared children to bed, and made old men curse and spit. It was the nightmare all the world feared.

“I kept the prophecy secret. And day and night, I worked to decipher what I could in the effort that the Return would never come to pass.” Ezrah cursed. “Now I see I was a fool to think I could alter the prophecy, and a blind one to miss that the most important piece was right beneath my nose.”

Kirin shook his head. “What does the true Return have to do with me?”

“You are at the center of it. There is a power inside you, one that is both terrible and great beyond imagination. That you hold the sword without pain is evidence that you are the destined wielder the prophecy speaks of.”

“What does the prophecy say?”

Ezrah hesitated.

He gripped his grandfather's arm. "Tell me."

"The prophecy states that if you do not learn to control the sword and your power, your fate will be one of sorrow and death. You will wield a power more dreadful than a hundred Returns, ultimately bringing the world to its knees."

Kirin backed away. "You're wrong..."

"It is not your fault, for the sword holds a terrible darkness," Ezrah said, eyeing the blade, "A darkness borne of its previous owner."

"Vera?" he said in disbelief.

"No. The sword is called Morrowil. It was once held by Kail, the leader of the Ronin."

"You mean the betrayer of men..."

"Some call him that. Regardless, whether by your own design, the swords, or another's, it is your destiny to become the harbinger of chaos."

Kirin forced his racing thoughts to slow. He shook his head. "Damn the prophecy! Whatever it says, that's not me! I will fight it!"

Ezrah's reply was quiet and cold, "Just as you fought what you did to Ren and the others?"

He swallowed, looking away. "Is... is there no hope?"

He felt a strong hand upon his shoulder. "You have me. And there is one chance, but it is not without peril." Kirin looked up. "I uncovered a slim passage of prophecy. Where countless paths lead to ruin, there is one that treads death and chaos, but leads to salvation. It is a prophecy called the Knife's Edge."

"What am I to do?"

"You must flee," Ezrah said and hastened towards a dresser made of

polished silveroot. He murmured something, and then plunged his hands into the bookshelves. As if there were no books, the man's hand extended, flowing beyond. Ezrah's face contorted until a look of satisfaction settled and he pulled his hand back from the magical bookcase.

Kirin watched as Ezrah returned and in the palm of his hand sat a pendant with the symbols of the Great Kingdoms. "This is what you will need. It is very rare. Under its protection you can cross the Gates, then from there, you will find safety in Daerval, in the land of the Lost Woods. The path is far from certain and there are many pitfalls along the way, but this is our only hope." Ezrah smiled, his deep-set lines becoming, for the first time, warm. "Take it," he said and tightened Kirin's hand into a fist around the pendant

Kirin gripped the pendant, looking around the room. The candle flickered on the desk, and the fire crackled in the corner. The scene was too serene, too starkly quiet to match the chaos that roiled in his mind. Were it any other day, he would be fireside, huddled over a bowl of soup after a long morning of mental or physical training, close to his brothers, the other Devari in their warm, lively halls. "I will do whatever it takes," he said.

"There is one last thing. You must take that as well." Ezrah motioned to the sword on the ground.

"No, I..." Suddenly the visions returned and he fell to his knees. He saw their faces. Forgha, Maerus, and Ren, and he whispered in horror, "I killed everyone."

"It's all right, my boy, but you must be quiet." Kirin heard the rattle of boots in the halls and he forced himself to silence, but he couldn't stop the visions. He heard his grandfather's soothing voice, "I can make it stop. I promise, but there will be a price."

He gripped his grandfather's robed sleeve. "Anything," he pleaded.

"I will cleanse you of what you have seen, for your sake, and for the sake of the prophecy," Ezrah replied. "However, it will only be temporary. One day, you will remember who you are, and where you came from. But for now, you must leave all that behind."

“Who am I to be then?”

“At your core, you will always be Kirin. We never lose ourselves, even if we forget our names, or our ways.”

Kirin tried to slow things down, and make sense of his tangled thoughts. Though he desired more than anything to forget his visions, the horrible image of Vera impaled on the sword, the look of betrayal and horror on Ren’s face, he could not imagine the thought of losing everything he knew. All my memories gone. The thought was somehow more terrifying than death.

Ezrah looked to the door again as boot strikes sounded, and the alarm echoed through the thick door. “There is no more time. They will be here soon.”

Kirin’s mind was already made up. “I will do what I must.”

“So be it.” Ezrah’s robed arm extended as he touched the side of Kirin’s head. “This is going to be painful, I apologize in advance.”

“I’m ready.” As he spoke, pain spiraled through him, coursing through his body and making his back bend until he thought his spine would snap. He threw open his mouth in a howl and a barrier of silence stuffed the cry back down. He shut his eyes and let the pain fill him, embracing the leaf, but even the leaf shattered, lost in a whirlpool of mind- numbing pain. Slowly the world returned and he opened his eyes.

“It is done,” Ezrah whispered.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I’m still me. I still remember everything.”

“The spell will enact as soon as you leave the walls of the Citadel,” the Arbiter replied.

“Then how will I know what to do, where to go if I lose my memory?”

“The spell will guide you. I have imparted all the knowledge you need to know to make it safely across the gates, and to find your

destiny. Everything you know now will be temporarily held behind this barrier.

“Lastly, you must leave the name Kirin behind. There are those within these walls that seek the sword as well, and it’s safe to assume they will soon know of the events that transpired here. Take the name Gray,” Ezrah said with a smile. “It was what I wanted your mother to name you, if I had my choice.” He turned as boots thundered just outside the door. “Now we must get you out of here.”

As he spoke, a hard knock rattled the door to his chambers. They both turned to the noise, like thieves caught in the act. Ezrah snatched Kirin’s cuff. “No one must know you were here, quick!” Kirin grabbed the sword as the Arbiter dragged him across the room to the other end. Ezrah pulled back another bookshelf, letting tomes shower to the ground.

The knock came again, even louder than before.

“Who is it? Who dares bother me in my studies?” Ezrah called, his voice now booming. The voice of an Arbiter.

“It is me,” came the reply, equally, if not more powerful.

Kirin froze. Ezrah did the same. Who could command his grandfather? Whose voice was that?

Ezrah nearly stuttered. He turned, reaching behind the bookcase, tugging it further away from the wall. He moved behind it, pulling Kirin with him. “One moment,” he replied, “You caught me in my studies. I didn’t know there was anything of grave importance happening today.” The bookcase still hid them from the sight of the entryway.

“Open the door,” came the brisk command, even more menacing.

Instead, Ezrah touched a stone in the wall and it slid out as if well-slicked, and instantly Kirin recognized it. A transporter, he realized, hidden by the bookcase. Ezrah embraced him. “Good luck.” The knocks thundered even louder, “Remember, the power of the

Arbiter flows in your veins, listen to it well, for it is not the power of strength, but the power of truth. I will be with you every step in my own way."

Kirin summoned a smile, his heart pounding fearfully in his chest.

Suddenly, the crack of bursting timber echoed throughout the room. Ezrah smacked the wall, and a dark purple light surrounded Kirin, holding him like a casing of stone once more, and the world went black. The last image he saw was his grandfather's smile and the white hem of the Patriarch's robes, turning the corner of the bookcase.

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The blanket of purple evaporated. Kirin opened his eyes, and saw he was standing in the cold shade of a narrow alley. Beyond, he glimpsed the busy streets of Farbs.

"The Patriarch? his voice echoed in the silent alley. He knew he didn't have much time—the death of the leader of the Devari would not stay contained in the Citadel. It wouldn't be long before the whole city was alerted, and the streets would be swarming with Citadel and elite Farbian guards.

I'll have minutes, maybe more, before the alarm is rang, Kirin calculated, and even if I get passed the guards, those giant doors will be locked, ruling out any chance of my escape...

The alley was empty save for the tan walls, and clotheslines hanging high above. Nearby, in the damp sand, lay the pendant. He grabbed it and rose, moving to leave when he felt something. He looked back. There, in the shade of the alley, lay the sword. Kirin wished he could toss the cursed blade in the darkest well and not think of it again. Instead, he reluctantly strapped the blade to his back, sheathing it where he once put his trusted sword, and with a deep breath he stepped into the desert street.

Before he knew it, his feet moved as if of their own will, guiding him through the streets, and press of bodies. Fear pounded in his veins as sounds crashed in his ears, and a thousand bright sights

paraded before his eyes.

At one point, his feet stopped in the crush of people. His mind railed, heart thumping against his ribcage. What's going on? A voice yelled in fear, blood pumping in his ears, and a cogent thought shot through like an arrow. It's happening. Is this what it feels like to go insane? But then it was gone. As he moved through the streets a voice grazed his consciousness, screaming to wake, but always it left and he kept moving.

People crashed into him, bustling, moving, the indistinct blur of pockmarked streets rutted from daily wear, the shouts of loudmouthed hawkers, of watchful guards standing in the crossroads and flanking bridges—he avoided their gaze especially, pulling his wool hood forward, but then he heard the blood, pounding in his ears. His feet flew even faster, as he pushed and shoved his way through the crowd.

Above, the sun turned a dark, ripe orange. He was losing time and something deep, something primal told him he had to move faster or all was lost. He had to make it. Then finally, at long last, the crowds thinned and he saw it—the tip of the tall, bronze colored gates. Abruptly and violently it sounded, cascading over the buildings and echoing through the streets, deep and ominous—the intoning of a bell. The alarm had been sounded.

Kirin, lost in a fog, didn't know what it meant exactly, but something inside him tensed. All around him, others stiffened. Their eyes panned up as they listened. Far ahead, at the gates, there was commotion. He ran.

He neared and watched as guards flocked to the doors, blocking the giant, arched entry that led out of the desert city. He watched, confused. Something inside him fell, disheartened, but still his feet told him he had to continue. And so he did, not sure what he was doing. As he broached the giant outer gates, his steps slowed as he remembered something dangerous. A dying part of him yelled at him to flee and run from this place. You bear the mark! Kirin looked down to his arm, and peeled back his sleeve to see a strange black insignia. He couldn't understand it. All the lines of it made sense to him, but the whole of it was strangely unreadable. He

fearfully eyed the row of armored men, their halberds crossed, sharp edges catching the light of the setting sun. They will not let you pass! They will kill you if you try! Still, Kirin's pause lasted only a moment and his feet moved again, slowly forward. He tried to stop them, but to no avail. His eyes flickered to each of the tall sentries garbed in plated metal and black cloth. They stood before the immense open doors like a wall of muscle, and metal. He swallowed. For a moment, their eyes locked onto him. He stood frozen, surely caught, and then, just like that, they passed, brushing over him to watch the milling crowds beyond. It was as if he was never there, no more than a wisp of desert sand, visible, and then gone the next moment.

He took another step. Still, the guard's eyes never shifted. He ducked beneath the crossed halberds of two tall guards, crossing the threshold of the gates and something deep hit him. He turned and looked at the city for a moment, but that tie fled too and he turned away once more. Kirin continued. He felt something in the pit of his stomach, as if he was losing something important and long held with each step.

With the next step, he forgot his name, but even that worry and strangeness passed away like a desert breeze, as if it was just a trifling memory. As he walked, the young man watched the giant sand and stone archway overhead, and then before he knew it, he was beyond, and looking into the blustery, cold winds of the Reliahs Desert. Behind him, there was a thud as the huge gates slammed shut.

As if standing in another's feet, the young man took one step and then another into the harsh desert, protecting his face from the fierce sand flurries, with the cloth of his tattered cloak. Moving, always moving, into the south and to another world, to the world of Daerval.

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Chapter Six

AWAKENING

Gray awoke with a strange, but familiar sensation.

It was like many mornings, but this time he felt the pressure of eyes on him so heavy it ripped him awake, tearing him from a pleasant dream. Normally the sensation was reassuring like being tucked inside a blanket, almost as if he were being watched over. But today the blanket no longer felt sheltering, but suffocating. He tried to shift his mind from it.

He looked around the dawn-lit chamber, reassuring himself with the familiar image. His room was small and simply furnished. Each piece of furniture was a rich brown, burnished from time and carved from Silveroots, the long-standing monarchs of the Lost Woods. His bed was tucked against the wall farthest from the door. Beside his bed was a small stand, his creation. A heavy bookcase lined the wall opposite. It was filled with tomes of Mura's, most of which Gray had already read. His favorite book sat on his bedside stand, the pages heavily worn. He glanced to its leather cover, eyeing the gold lettering: Tales of the Ronin.

He sat up, letting the covers tumble, and then groaned in pain, noticing the welts on his body like purple snakes—outlines from Mura's training staff. Suddenly, the door to his room burst open.

Mura stood in the doorway, garbed in forest hues, with soft leather boots suitable for stealth. A grimace lined his weathered face. "Still in bed?" In his right hand, Mura gripped a polished quarterstaff.

"Still? What are you talking about? The sun's barely up."

Mura grunted. "Barely and is are not barely different."

"What? I don't even think you know what that means," Gray grumbled. "You should know better. Wine ought to be drunk at

night Mura."

"It means if you don't get out of bed now, I'm going to take that bed out from beneath you, and your feistiness with it." Mura thumped his staff on the floor for emphasis.

"All right, hold on," he slowly pushed back the covers and—

In his periphery, he saw Mura heft his staff. Not good. He scrambled out of bed landing in a crouch balanced on the balls of his feet. His blood pumped and his covers were haphazardly draped across his half-naked body.

"I see you can move when you need to."

"Now that you got me up, mind helping me out? Toss me those," he said, pointing to the pair of britches next to Mura who glanced down, grimace deepening, then wordlessly used his staff and tossed the pants.

Gray snagged them from the air, and sat back on the bed slipping them on. Soft and worn, though fitted enough for hunting or stealth, his pants were one of the few articles that remained from his past, along with his much-treasured worn gray cloak. It hung from a hook upon the wall. He eyed its emblem of twin-crossed swords and wondered again, guessing at their significance. He often conjured stories about the mysterious insignia, imagining faraway lands.

The thought reminded him of the other item of his past. He pointedly avoided looking to the cubbyhole behind the bookcase, not wanting to attract Mura's keen eye. He had not touched the blade for two years, but he still felt it. Its casing of cloth did nothing to dampen the fear that turned his stomach when thinking about it. It pulled at him, even now, like a moth to a flame.

"More training today?" he questioned.

Mura grumbled. "I'm not sure how to answer you when you ask foolish questions. Of course we train today. Now finish dressing," then the hermit paused, revealing a devious smile. "Oh, and bring

your sword. I want to see it now."

The door shut behind him.

For two years, the man had known all along. Gray dove towards the bookcase and hauled it away from the wall. There sat an unassuming bundle of white cloth. It was more than twice the length of his forearm. He carefully examined the bundle's surface. There it was. A single strand of his brown hair rested on the white fabric. It was just as he'd left it long ago, as if not a day had gone by.

"Tricky old man," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. Grabbing the bundle, he unwrapped the sword. The bright steel glinted, dangerous and beautiful. Dried blood, a blackish red, caked its keen edge—just as the day he found it. Its silver hue glowed beneath the blood.

His grip tightened, loathing the blade. With water from the washbasin, he scrubbed the blade with his bare hands, turning the bowl a dark scarlet, then inspected it under the light of the window. It gleamed as if brand new. He quickly wrapped the sword, running out of the hut.

An early morning fog was fading, unveiling the clearing. The hut sat in the center of a glade, surrounded by the dense Lost Woods. Mura stood near an old stump used for chopping firewood, where a stubborn piece of oak sat which Gray had been unable to hew.

Wordlessly, he handed the blade to Mura. The hermit assessed the blade, scrutinizing it with a careful eye. If Mura knew the origin of the blade, he might uncover more of his past. "Does it look familiar?" he asked.

Mura's peppered hair swayed. "I'm afraid not. Where'd you get it, boy?"

Such a simple question, but when Gray reached into his mind to answer, he saw nothing of his past. As if it was shut behind a door that he didn't have the key to. "I don't know," he replied.

Running a finger along the blade's edge, Mura shrugged. "Your past is your own, lad. I've never asked, and I never will."

Gray gripped the hermit's arm, stopping him before he continued, "I wish I knew. I have nothing to hide from you, but I simply can't remember. My last memory is holding the blade when I entered the woods. Other than that..."

Mura rubbed his jaw. "Sometimes things are forgotten for a reason. Now put your sword away. We won't need it today."

"I doubt it's much good anyway," Gray agreed.

Mura twisted and the blade arced faster than light. It cleaved the stubborn hunk of firewood, slicing like molten iron through paper. The two halves tumbled to the forest floor. "It can cut well enough, but this is a weapon of death, and it has seen much blood. I'm afraid it would not suit for our practice today."

Gray tried to hide his surprise. "Then we'll train with staffs?"

Mura winked, handing back his sword, disappearing into the hut. He came back with two strange looking blades, constructed from light wood. Mura handed him a blade. "Today I want to test your skill and limits with a sword. These are made of yen boughs, so they should only smart a bit. It won't do to be slicing each other to ribbons just yet."

Mura turned, walking away.

"Wait, where are you going?" he asked. "Aren't we sparring here?"

Mura looked back with a wink. "I have something else in mind. Today, we'll train like never before."

Chapter Seven

KAIL'S TREE

Kail was a statue of calm, sitting cross-legged beneath the shelter of a yen tree. The blades of grass leaned away from the wanderer, but the shadows drew nearer.

A tiny speck shot into the night sky like an arrow. It slowed to a stop, as if stuck in the starry web, and then suddenly it burst into golden rain. A chorus of good cheer erupted. Eyes closed, he listened to the sound of laughter as if hearing it for the first time. How long has it been since I've felt the warmth of an inn, the taste of wine, or even shared the company of another? Ages, he knew. The chill darkness was his only comfort now.

Shunning the thoughts, he closed his eyes and sought relentlessly. Not with his eyes, but with an entirely different sense. Outside his mind, the shadows from the ground and tree inched closer. The black tendrils reached for his limbs.

As he had done many times, he stalked closer to the nexus within his mind. Others had reached for the flow before and been less than lucky—grasping the power too quickly could incinerate one's body, like a burning ember to dry tinder. Once he embraced the nexus, he was gone.

His vision flew forward, over the green fields. He raced toward the Eastern Kingdoms. The grass turned to sandy plains, and then to the rocky Crags. It was an impenetrable terrain of rock and towering boulders. In its center was a deep chasm called The Rift where it was said the world split thousands of years ago, before even Kail was alive, and now tiny crag beasts dwelled. Somewhere in that land, the ancient Kingdom of Stone, Dun Varis, still existed. Kail had heard the rumors. A whole city and its people, resurrected from the ashes of the Lieon, but even his eye could not attest to the truth of it.

To the north, the land was just as pitiless. The rocky Crags became the white plains of the Merkal Desert. There, the cruel sun took out its aggression on the sunbaked people, the foul-mouthed traders of the east. Still, there was nothing. No sign of what he sought and time was wearing thin, for he could only hold the vision for so long. Where are you?

Back under the tree where his body sat unaware, the groping shadows turned black as fetid oil. They encircled him.

Within his mind, Kail pushed forward, flying north. His vision swooped down into a wide basin. There sat the jewel of the Eastern Kingdoms, Rimdel. A trader's paradise.
It was a capital with no central rule, inhabited by only thieves, ruffians, and traders as hard as stone. But where once was a sprawling city, teeming with life, now sat a ruined and ashy pit that sprawled for miles. Far and wide, the land was dyed a soul-sucking black. The Eastern Kingdoms are done. Still it was not what he was looking for. Time was closing around him like a noose.

Back beneath the yen tree, his nails sunk into his palms, creating a thin stream of blood. The oozing black crept up his clothes, sucking in the moon's sickly yellow glow as it moved. It inched higher up his thick neck, like liquid crawlers, approaching his mouth. It left behind a trail of blood and red bruises. It reached his closed mouth and found his flaring nostrils. Slowly, it seeped inside, stealing his breath. The bulk of the shadow struck, constricting around his torso like a monstrous snake with the power to shatter bones. At the same time, the shadows inside expanded, pressing fine poisonous fangs into the soft skin of his throat.

However, he was far away, unaware that his body was dying. He traveled even faster. The world was a blur beneath him. His head swam, and he felt his mind ripping into two parts from the heat of the power. Finally, he smelled it. Their scent was on the wind—ancient yet new. He followed it and snowy plains coated with blood filled his vision. His eyes caught a trailing fleet of hulking beasts and at their head nine men upon tall deathless steeds. His eyes fell upon one of the dark figures with a huge spike upon his shoulder. The figure twisted, as if looking straight into Kail's soul. Despite the distance, for a fleeting moment, he saw a flash of red. Then, like a

cudgel to the side of his head, the vision shattered.

He sucked in the black liquid as his vision broke and he rushed back to his body like a tempest. His eyes bulged as the last drops of air were expelled from his lungs. With the darkness crushing him from every angle, he slowly rose, and shut his eyes. A maelstrom of wind pulsed out from his center, streaming out of every pore. He crushed the heavy black shadows like the sun's light on the last vestiges of night.

His shoulders rolled in a stretch. Even while holding my power they came. Which means they are either getting braver, or more desperate. He hoped it was the latter, but knew better. Wind flurries died at his feet and in the moon's pallid light, he watched the last of the black liquid slink along his hand. He brushed it off without looking. Then, with a touch of his power, he ignited it. The darkness cracked and hissed like water upon hot coals, and then disappeared as if it were never there.

He looked north and east. A cold settled over him that was not from the chill night. He had found them. And they were coming. He felt an all-too familiar regret, eyeing Lakewood.

At his back, he felt the presence of a shrouded forest—the ancient woods whose canopy was too thick for even his vision to penetrate. Kail's scarlet eyes hardened. His gray cloak emblazoned with crossed swords wavered in the wind. He knew what he had to do. At last he turned, and stalked into the night. Into the Lost Woods. What the boy carries must not fall into their hands, he vowed. He had worked too hard to prevent that —even become the traitor to keep the blade upon its destined path.

And if he failed, Kail knew, Daerval would be the first to fall before the entire world crumbled.

Chapter Eight

A HYMN TO AN ANCIENT FOREST

Gray watched the hidden pockets of darkness.

The Lost Woods possessed a haunting beauty. As he followed the hermit, he admired the mammoth tree trunks and knotted branches that twisted up to form a canopy. He inhaled the musky smell of decaying wood.

Before him, Mura hummed a pleasant melody,

Oh', Ancient trees and forest sullen, Those who do not, will not, see.

Yet, dull wits, will not hinder thee! As I bask beneath the great yen trees.

Oh, I have seen battles great! Fate that has seen the end of love,

But truth have I seen, so great. And hate, that blinds
Of all great minds,
Since sadness follows me.

Late has come my death,
But I have seen Kailith topple kings, And Omni battle giants,
When Seth screams defiant.

Ancient trees and forest sullen Those who do not, will not, see.

So who am I, to sing of sorrow? When there is always 'morrow.

After a while, the canopy thinned and the trees turned to saplings. The terrain rose steadily. Gray saw teeth marks gnawed into the base of one of the aspens, a beaver's missive, and suspected Mura must have been leading him to a body of water.

His mind strayed as they walked, thinking of his favorite stories, fantasizing about the legends and their heroic deeds.

“Mura, I’ve never heard that song before. How do you know it?”

“Are you curious about the song, or about Kail?” Gray missed a step. “I saw your face when I sang his name, you’d be hard pressed to hide a look like that.”

He rubbed a hand through his hair. “Kail and the song then. Both.”

Mura waved a hand dismissively. “Ah, the song is just something I picked up in my travels, either in the taverns of Lakewood, or the eastern trading provinces. As for Kail... seeing as you’ve read most of the tales, I suppose you want to know more than the average stories tell.”

“I do.”

Mura thumped his staff and gave a wink. “Lucky you, for I always find the stories of Kail the most interesting as well! So, how about the rumored legends of how he can never die? Or the tale of the fabled Vaults in the Hall of Wind, where they say he stashed the most precious of weapons. A weapon crafted by the gods.”

“What about the other Ronin? Together they could take him right?”

“Well, each of the Ronin had powers beyond any mortal. They were capable of vanquishing whole legions. Baro the Bull, slayer of giants, led the vanguard. Maris, the Trickster, had a tongue that was quick and sharp, and only his sword was quicker. Hiron, the Shadow, the voice of wisdom moved like water. Dared, the King-Slayer, never spoke, though always dealt the final blow. Aurelious, the Confessor, guided by truth, always took the final verdict. Aundevoria̋, the Protector, viewed life tantamount to all else. And finally, Omni, the Deceiver, who was Kail’s right-hand and dealt death like the seven winds.” He paused for emphasis. “It was said the last thing his enemies saw was always and inevitably his frozen-blue eyes beneath his shrouded mask. All of them powerful, all of them legends. But Kail was the strongest of all.

“They say his attacks could never be seen, even by the Ronin, that his blade was so quick it had never been seen out of its sheath. That he moved faster than light itself!” Mura exclaimed. With each word

Gray's pulse beat faster, and with the last words Mura suddenly pivoted, his staff flashed, racing towards him.

Gray tensed, backpedaling, though raising his yen sword in the last moment and the two collided.

"Ha! Guess I'm not as fast as the fabled Kail, or perhaps you are," Mura said with a wink.

Gray shook his head with an exasperated laugh. "You really are unpredictable sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" asked the hermit, sounding disappointed, and flashed another wink, before turning and heading back down the trail, whistling as if nothing had happened. Gray's blood cooled, but the stories still swirled in his head until the hermit announced at last, "We're here."

Chapter Nine

A Sight to Behold

The sound of raging water filled Gray's ears. Beyond a stand of trees he saw glimpses of rushing water. Mura quickly turned and headed towards it, and Gray dashed to catch up. He wound through the last few trees, ducked beneath a low branch and as he left the shelter of the woods, his right foot stepped out. But there was no ground to catch it. His step extended out over an abrupt ledge that spiraled down to a misty pool far below. He threw his weight backwards, groping when a strong arm clasped his own.

"Fool boy, always needing help," Mura muttered as he pulled him back from the dangerous precipice.

"You could have told me," Gray said, his heart still thumped inside his chest, one hand planted on the firm forest floor

Mura snorted. "Well I didn't think you would go charging out of the woods like a blind boar! Besides I didn't want to ruin the surprise."

It was Gray's turn to grumble as he pushed himself up, standing far back from the shelf. He brushed himself off, and for the first time, he was truly at a loss for words. The scene was suffused in light. The slim trail led to the side and onto a large rock outcropping that jutted out over the deadly drop. Far below the haze he saw a gleaming pool. His eyes followed the path upwards to the largest waterfall he had ever imagined. It flowed over a cliff arcing gently downward and then cascaded over the natural bridge, crashing against it, continuing its great descent. Furry moss covered the stones at the top of the falls, like teeth from which the mouth of the waterfall's torrent spewed.

"What do you think?" Mura's gruff voice was muffled by the roar of the falls.

"It's beautiful."

Mura laughed. “You do have such a way with words, my lad. The hermit looked at him, curiously. “Have you ever seen a waterfall?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He tried to dig through his memories, but like every other time, he ran into a barrier and frustration filled him. “What is this place called?”

“Maiden’s Mane. It’s one of four known as the Great Falls. Now are you ready to begin?”

“We’re sparring here?”

The hermit backed up onto the rock bridge. “Come and see for yourself, it’s as sturdy as can be.”

Gray waved his hands. “Oh, no. You won’t get me out there.”

“Well I can’t spar with myself. Come now.”

“What is wrong with this nice patch of solid earth?” Gray stomped on the ground.

“Why make things difficult? I’ll slip and break my neck, if I don’t plummet to my death first.” Mura only stared at him. Gray sighed. “Is it safe?”

“If you’d look, the rock is covered in rough lichen that’s as good a footing as any.”“Why though? It seems an unnecessary risk.”

“I have my reasons. Do you think every fight is fought on fair and even soil, with no obstacles and no distractions?”

“Well, no, but how often will I need the skills to fight over a waterfall?”

“Look beyond your own two feet, boy. I’ve taught you better than that. You should know at least one reason.”

“Surroundings?”

Mura grunted. “Go on.”

“I guess if I can learn to fight here, I can fight anywhere.”

“Aye, lad, once you put that head of yours to work, you really aren’t the hay-in-the-hair-bumpkin you pretend to be. But why just fighting?”

“What do you mean?”

“It goes beyond battle, lad. In any situation there are any number of distractions. That is how a man gets a dagger in his back, a lighter coin purse, or any other misfortune. A man who does not know his surroundings is a man half blind to the world around him. You must always be aware. Understand?” Gray nodded. “Good, now come.”

Walking out upon the furred rock, he put a hand down, to feel the lichen surface. The gray-green mat was coarse and grainy.

“You’re afraid of heights?”

He didn’t look up.

“All the more reason,” Mura replied. “I can teach you to conquer your fears, but I would rather you confront them. A man who knows his fears lives longer than a man without.”

With a heavy breath, Gray strode forward and raised his yen sword before him. A fine rain fell upon his face. “I’m ready.” He tried not to look in his periphery, tried not to imagine the sickening drop and his body smashing upon the sharp rocks.

“Good,” Mura said and ran a finger along the line of his jaw as he appraised Gray’s stance. “But a sword is much different than a staff. You must learn to hold yourself properly before anything else.”

Mura instructed him in a patient tone and Gray listened. He wondered if he had used a blade before, for holding the yen sword in his fists felt right, like a forgotten dream.

His feet shifted in anticipation. Water thundered, and tension built.

Chapter Ten

RENMAI

Wind whipped his cloak alive, and strands of hair lashed his face. Kail stared over the cliff's edge. He watched the two men.

They stood talking twenty paces apart. The boy practically trembled with excitement. As his fingers flitted at his side, the cloaked man froze, marveling at the odd and familiar gesture. The boy moved, and took a stance. The difference in his posture was far too subtle for anyone else to recognize or understand.

"Sa Hira..." Kail whispered. A smirk creased his lips when the old man spoke.

Kail extended his hand, curling his fingers into a cup. He focused on the hermit's mouth. With a scooping gesture, as if carving out a handful of air, he caught the breath before the hermit's lips and grappled it towards him. Words took shape as if whispered in his ear.

"No, my boy. Standing as surely as a wolf in the brush is just lounging. A Renmai Stance. I never thought I would see it."

"So he's more than just a hermit," Kail mused. Suddenly, a call echoed through the woods, barely audible. It was far too muted for the two below, especially under the water's roar, but he heard. His eyes shifted and muscles tightened like steel ropes. A hand was on his plain leather scabbard. They're close.

Kail knelt. With one hand he stripped away layers of moss at his feet, and put his palm to the ground. The dirt was soft and wet. He waited until the cry resounded again, and this time, he chased it, smacking his palm to the ground. Upon impact, his senses rushed into the ground and he was toppling over the ledge, tumbling down the face of the falls, flowing with the racing torrent. He escaped the sucking rush of water and flew into the woods. He weaved through

the trees with his second sight. Shadows rushed towards him, while others shrieked, shirking away as if his presence was poison.

The cry ricocheted and he followed it. But the sound was dying quickly. He could almost see it like a thin wisp in the air, receding into the woods. Kail flew faster, pushing harder to catch it. Finally, the sound stopped. He was still charging forward, rushing to catch it when he saw the trap. He knew he was caught, unable to slow his headlong dash, and a huge blade from around the last tree rushed towards his face. Its gleaming edge pierced the tip of his ethereal form. There was nothing he could do. Without a second thought, he severed the cord between his two selves.

He rushed back into his stationary body, eyes snapping wide as if ice water had drenched his skin. Immediately, he vomited to one side, and wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. A mounting feeling of insanity, of his mind shredding into two parts, rose to the surface. Forcefully, he shoved it down. Snapping the thread between forms was dangerous, at best, and even he didn't know the full extent of it. He felt something, and glanced down at his muscled forearm to see a tremor ripple beneath his flesh.

Calmly, Kail stood. The boy will die first, he thought emotionless, withdrawing into himself as he turned. His cloak snapped and whipped with purpose.

Chapter Eleven

A RISING WIND

The silence broke with the screech of a hawk.

Gray leapt and crashed against Mura's staff with a thwack. He inched closer to the hermit's face, seeing an opening. Suddenly, Mura's weight shifted. With an agile twist his sword sluiced off, and Mura's staff halted, parting his hair with the force of its descent. "If you want to ever master that sword of yours, you'll have to master your emotions."

Gray attacked again, trying everything he knew, seeking the hermit's openings. Mura slid to the right and his right, shoulder opened up. Gray twisted, striking horizontally, but pulling the strike in the last moment before Mura's parry. The yen tip dashed for the hermit's torso, but collided with the staff, sweeping his strike aside.

"Too predictable! You want my midsection? Then attack my head!" Mura yelled.

He raised his sword striking for Mura's head, repeatedly hammering all three angles. He gave the hermit no time to counterattack as he advanced, driving him back with each grueling step. The cascade grew louder, deafening in his ears as he rained blows upon the hermit. Mura slipped his staff to block his side once more, but Gray lunged inward, thrusting with a cry. He pulled the blow and swung upwards, aiming for the most unpredictable target he could imagine —his yen blade flashed fast as lightning, and he imagined himself a corded bundle of energy as it arced upwards scraping the hermit's leg until—thwack.

He landed heavily, mossy stone softening his fall. Only when he opened his eyes did he realize what happened. His chest throbbed. He looked up. The hermit's staff was extended rod-straight, still in the strike. Slowly, the hermit let the staff fall.

“A mind has many parts. Never focus to the exclusion of all else that you become blind. If you attack offensively, always expect an opening.” Gray rubbed his chest, trying to catch his breath. “Are you all right?”

Gray was surprised at the compassion in the man’s voice. He rose to his feet. “I am, but no matter what I do, I just can’t hit you.”

“You can, and you will. But remember,” he advised, “a castle is meant to defend and attack.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If a castle only defends, what then? If it never attacks and its people only watch, and stand arrogantly behind its high walls?”

“It will fall.”

Mura jabbed his temple with a thick finger. “Ah, now you’re using your head! You see, even in defense there is offense, and the same is true of the reverse. Always imagine that if you fight with only one part of yourself, or only one way, you will always lose. The greatest fighters use all parts, like the High Generals of the Lieon.”

“And yet they still lost,” he replied.

“A valid point,” Mura said, “Let it be said though, there was no real victory. But that’s a history lesson for another time. Focus now. Mind, body, defense, offense, softness, hardness. All of these and more must be considered, and always in union.” Gray attacked again. He swung from above then below, moving slowly at first, but building pace, flowing smoothly from striking to blocking. “Good!” Mura barked. “You’re getting it!” he said, parrying a strike.

A smile grew on his face as he weaved the thrust into an undercut, and the ease of the movement sparked something. Fisher in the Shallows to Dipping Moon—a snaking thrust to an upward strike from which its power is derived from the bending, and swift upward lift of the legs, said a distant, familiar voice. He stumbled as the knowledge and images flooded his mind, and when he regained his senses he saw Mura’s blow racing towards his head.

Instinctively, Gray ducked and rolled beneath it, and the world came into spinning focus as he reached the ledge, the fall teetering in his vision, the spray and rocks beneath racing forward.

Mura grabbed Gray's shoulder and flung him back, and the together they landed heavily on the solid stone. "Let's not do that again," Mura said. "What just happened? Your past?"

"I'm not sure. I saw images of moves. I think... I'm starting to remember," he said, his fist clenching on the rough, green lichen.

"Good!" exclaimed Mura. "Then show me what you learned!"

The hermit jumped to his feet, lashing out, and Gray leapt over the staff and retaliated, giving into his mind and the sword. Mura retreated. Gray's Lopping the Branch grazed the hermit's brow. Stepping back, Mura breathed hard and Gray hid a smile. "Do you need a rest?" he yelled over the sound of the falls.

The hermit dove towards Gray. "Parry!" he shouted, striking down and Gray swung his sword to his shoulder, covering his flank. "Strike!" And he struck. He flowed through Mura's commands. "Parry, strike, evade!" And at the last strike, Gray blocked. Mura held the block for a moment, and then with a twist of his wrists, he flicked the blade like an adder's bite.

Gray rebounded, feet scraping along the mossy stone. There was no extra strength in Mura's block and yet, he was pushed backward by that simple added twist. "Teach me that," he said.

"Teach you what?"

"What you just did. What was that?"

Mura shrugged. "A little trick."

"That was more than a little trick," Gray replied. "You gained power from nothing."

"Not nothing," the hermit said, "There is power to be found and added in every move, and not always in the might of ones arms, but often in the hidden movements. First you must loosen your whole

body, it must be like a cord that snaps tight at the last moment. Imagine yourself like a bolt of lightning, quiet and deadly, and only upon impact do you shatter stone and splinter wood." Gray did as he instructed. With each strike he began to understand what Mura meant—the added flick became audible, adding a whoosh to the tip of his yen bundle.

"You've got it," he proclaimed with a broad sweep of his arms.

With a flash of his yen sword, Gray struck Mura's open flank, this time adding the snap to his sword. Mura threw up his staff and the two weapons collided. But with Gray's added power the hermit toppled backwards, falling into a nearby bush.

"Caught you behind your castle wall did I?" Gray asked as he extended a hand.

Mura wiped an astonished look from his face and grumbled, "Aye, aye, well done lad." He took his hand and rose, brushing dry twigs and leaves from his pants. "Seems you've learned enough for today, and besides, the weather appears to be taking a turn for the worse." He eyed the ominous black clouds that gathered in the distance.

Looking around at last, Gray observed that they had not only backed off the bridge during the fight, but also now stood in the glade before the falls. A stand of trees obscured the view. Glancing back to his companion, he noticed with frustration that only a trace of sweat dotted the hermit's forehead. Other than that, Mura was breathing no harder than if he had just come back from a walk in the woods. However, the smug smile was off his face, and he thought he could sleep easy at that sight. If I can sleep, as the bruises that covered his body coming into focus. He glanced to Mura who was now examining some strange looking blood-red mushrooms in the path.

"What is it?" Gray asked.

"I'm not sure," Mura said, scratching his head. "These shouldn't be here..." The curious red color of the mushrooms tugged at Gray's curiosity. He approached and a smell like rancid meat hit his nose and he cringed. Pinching his nose with one hand, he reached out

with the other to check if they had gills when Mura yelled. “Don’t touch them!” The authority of the order made his hand shoot back.

“Why?”

Mura walked over and knelt down beside him. He stared at the mushrooms before him and scrubbed a hand through his stubble. “I don’t know, but something tells me to be cautious about them.”

“Even more than usual?”

“Aye, I’ve lived here for years, but something feels different... A strange presence,” the hermit muttered, and then stood. “Let’s head back, lad. It’ll be good to get out of this cursed wind,” he grumbled to himself, walking back towards the house, muttering something about a pipe and a fire.

Gray gave one last look at the peculiar red mushrooms. At his side, his fingers burned as if he had touched the strange fungi. Oddly, even his wrist tingled and he pulled back his sleeve to reveal the sinuous tattoo upon his wrist. Turning, he hurried after Mura beneath the shrouded canopy, towards the darkening clouds.

Chapter Twelve

THE HARROWING GALE

Gray opened the door of the hut and was greeted by the aroma of stew. Throwing off his boots, he rushed to the fireplace. “When did you have time to make this? We’ve been out all day.”

Settling into a chair, Mura picked up his favorite dagger and began to whittle. “You were asleep. It’s been simmering all day, which might I add, is the only proper way to make stew.”

The whole house smelled of spices, onions, and roast chicken. Warmth seeped back into his numb fingers. Outside, the wind howled, and the chimes that hung from the low eaves crashed. “The wind is really picking up.”

Mura grunted. “Las Fael’wyn, the elves call it, or in the common tongue, ‘the harrowing gale’.” He continued his calm strokes, letting the shavings fall into a bowl on the floor.

“Fael’wyn...” Gray said to himself in thought, “Wait, isn’t it ‘wind’? I mean, doesn’t it mean ‘the harrowing wind’?”

Mura looked up in surprise. “How’d you know that?”

“Because you taught me...”

“Did I?” Mura asked. Gray couldn’t tell if he was joking. “Well then, I’m a good teacher. Yes, I remember now. I told you about the basic structure of Elvish.” He chuckled softly. “I might have skipped a few things for practical purposes, but, yes, that is what it means. Win is the Elvish word for ‘wind’.”

Gray repeated the term to himself and wondered how many things the elves had named. Grabbing a spoon that hung from the brick fireplace, he stirred the stew. His mouth watered and he eyed a piece of golden brown meat. He snatched it, and then juggled his

steaming prize before popping it into his mouth. It singed his tongue and he yelped.

Behind him, Mura chuckled.

Gray turned with a glare. “Are you ever going to finish that thing?” he motioned to the piece of wood in the hermit’s hands that vaguely resembled a pipe. Instead of saying anything, Mura calmly put down his tools and disappeared into his room.

Gray heard him rummaging, and then dragging what sounded like a large object across the wooden floor. With a grunt of success he came back out carrying a dark blue trunk with a tarnished lock and gilded with silver oak leaves. He set it down with a heavy thud.

Grabbing the stool from the table he placed it before Gray, and then sat back down. “Sit,” he said. Gray had never seen the ornate chest before, and a thousand questions wrestled in his head. Shadows played on the chest, and the ornate silver looked out of place in the rustic cabin. From his vest pocket Mura extracted a key, and then inserted it into the lock. With a deft twist, and a scratching whine, it unlocked. Mura lifted the heavy lid. He hid the contents and drew out something. Then, he shut the lid with a bang, and relocked the chest.

In his hands lay a tome as fat as a brick. Gold and silver reinforced the thick spine. The hermit stroked the book’s worn cover. “Ages has it been since I’ve held this.”

“Where’d you get it?”

Mura words were quick, as if it was a well-worn memory much like the book. “I purchased it in the unlikeliest of shops, just shy of the port, in the city of Reym, when I was your age.” He must have seen Gray’s look of confusion. “Reym is a traveler’s city. It’s not far from the great Tir Re’ Dol, used as a waypoint. Many interesting things can be found there if one knows where to look.” Despite the hermit’s earnest tone, something seemed absent from his story. The hermit continued, “There is something I want to show you.” He peeled opened the book and Gray saw strange patterns upon the aged parchment.

Gray faintly recognized the symbols. “I’ve seen those before,” he whispered, but as he tried to remember, he hit the same wall. Frustrated, he shook his head. “Go on,” he said, and Mura continued.

“These symbols stand for each of the nine Great Kingdoms. Each representing an element of old,” Mura said, pointing to each in turn. “Forest for the Kingdom of Eldas, home of the Elves, the element of nature; water for the ancient city of Seria within the Grand Falls, often called the city of tranquility; stone for the stronghold of Lander, whose walls were thicker than small cities, fortified within the rocky crags; moon for the city of Narim, coveted in the dark hills—half above, and half beneath the land, a vast, subterranean gem; sun for the shining keeps of Vaster, like alabaster jewels, always in the dawn’s light; metal for the city of Yronia, backed against the deep mines, a land of steam and gleaming steel; fire for the dark Farbs whose incantations ignite the night sky; and at last, the Kingdom of Flesh for Covai, a city of men, women, and beast, the land of the Mortal Being, the largest spiritual sect of all the lands. Each are called the shining jewels, the Great Kingdoms of the Lieon.”

Gray leaned forward to get a closer look.

“Of course,” Mura said, sitting back. “However, there is one kingdom that is often forgotten.” The hermit paused, his hand running over the coarse paper as he turned the page to reveal a symbol that made his pulse skip.

Mura spoke in a dark tone, “The symbol of wind. It stood for the ancient city of Morrow, upon the windy cliffs of Ren Nar that oversaw the world. It is the banished element.”

Gray looked to the snaking pattern of wind, losing himself in its design. He wanted to trace his fingers over its familiar shape when Mura snapped the cover shut with a thud, shattering his trance.

The hermit stood. “I’m giving it to you,” he said, hefting the book.

Eyeing the unreadable glyphs upon the cover he asked, “And how am I to read it? I don’t even know what language that is.”

“The language is called Yorin. I will teach it to you. For now, simply treat it well,” he said and then stretched. “The stew looks ready. Go ahead and serve it up. I’ll put this in your room with the rest of your books.”

Gray set out two wooden bowls along with a crusty loaf. Chewing on a small hunk of the bread, he hooked the teakettle over the fire’s flames, when there was a soft thunk from outside, barely loud enough to be heard over the wind. He cursed. Probably just another loose shingle from the roof, and I’ll be the one that will have to fix it. As he turned, a loud rasp made him freeze. He leaned forward, peering out the darkened window. Branches swished. Just the wind, he repeated when a movement caught his eye. “What kind of animal…?”

A shriek split the wind’s moan, and he backed away from the dark window.

“Douse the flame boy!” Mura kicked the kettle. The fire hissed and the room plunged into darkness.

He snatched the hermit’s sleeve. “What’s going on?”

Mura put his fingers to his lips. Pale moonlight lit the man’s features. In the silence, Gray heard it. Low grunts and snarls. “Go to the back door,” the hermit whispered. “Then when I tell you to—”

With a roar, the door burst. Gray was blown back. In a daze, he crawled behind a nearby chair when he saw the gleam of metal. Mura’s dagger. He gripped it, then tucked it in his leather belt.

Like an apparition, Mura slid into the shadow of the wall. Unease in the pit of his stomach, Gray peeked around the chair, peering at a cloud of dust where the door once stood.

Click… click… click… it sounded like nails rapping against the wood floor.

Click… click… It came closer still.

Then, it stopped.

With his back pressed to the chair, Gray twisted to look for Mura and saw only shadows, when a clouded breath filled his vision. Silently, he scrambled away, moving to the other side of the chair. He looked back and saw his nightmares confirmed. A massive head swiveled to the sound—where Gray had been only moments before. The beast gave a violent, jagged snort. With a rasping breath that frosted in the air, the massive head slunk back. The room returned to a chilling silence.

Gray caught his breath as more shadows skulked across the window, their strange shapes reflecting on the wall. He eyed his open bedroom door. In a bent dash, he slipped from one dark shadow to the next.

A rough hand clasped over his mouth. “Stay quiet.”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the hermit’s lined features. He nodded and silently, they made their way to the back hallway. Gray saw long scratches along the wall, and pockmarks in the wood floor like the rivets of a nail. He paused.

“I can’t leave it,” he whispered and Mura raised a thick brow.

“What are you talking about?” Mura reached out, but was too slow and Gray scrambled to his room. Inside, other than the broken window, the room seemed unscathed. Strange ruby light came through the window and lit his bed. There it was. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his cloth wrapped sword.

He grabbed the bundle, when the rapping sounded again. Click... Click... Click...

Slipping through the window, he stayed low and kept to the shadows of the walls. Quickly, he made his way to the back of the house. The hermit was waiting for him. Gray released a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding.

Mura scowled. “You’ll explain that to me one day, and I’ll win that argument.” He gripped his shoulder. “Stay close to me, and don’t stop for anything.” And together they moved into the Lost Woods.

Chapter Thirteen

The Spire

Karil shoved another set of riding clothes into her pack and turned from her bed. Her room was still, but her heart was not. Even the serene night mocked her frantic mind.

From the window above her bed, azure scrolls lit her room. An ornately carved bookshelf sat in the room's corner. In the center, a wide-table, its stout legs made of silveroot, flowing as if alive with liquid silver. Elvin craftsmanship fit for a princess. A tranquil scene, but still her hand trembled, for beyond these walls lurked danger. Her gaze jumped to the plum-colored door made of heartwood. Heartwood was harder than most human metals—it would take a small army to break it down, but she knew that wouldn't save her. He will be here any minute, she prayed.

She looked down and saw the polished stone in her palm. The rock was carved with a pattern of a leaf, stunningly real, as if the leaf had shed its skin upon the emerald stone. It was a gift of her fathers, something she had long forgotten, and childhood memories flooded through her. Only things I can't live without, she repeated. She set it aside, placing it in a pile of books, jewelry, and precious things likely never to be seen again. Surely it's too small to matter, she thought and quickly tucked the smooth stone in her bag.

The hard rap of knuckles sounded on the door. Karil grabbed a fistful of her split- riding skirt. Three knocks. She remembered their code and rushed to the door, unlocking it. Rydel flowed inside like a tempest. He passed her wordlessly and strode to the window. His grand hando cloak of black and forest green fluttered as he moved. Karil knew the cloak silently demanded respect, for he was one of only ten elves who bore the same shroud. He took the room in two giant strides, throwing back the drapes.

Outside, lights from the kingdom glowed. Hues of amethyst and sapphire lit the forest. A vast canopy was obscured by mist and

cloud. Far below, tiny white dots blushed where twisting paths wound throughout the forest. The whole kingdom appeared as if stars were flung amid the trees. Each tree was a towering guardian, their trunks the width of cities. Below, a staircase glimmered, as if made of shimmering glass. It encircled the main structure they were in, the massive Spire, twining all the way up the Great Tree.

“Is it time?” she asked, stepping forward. Her voice was strong. She was glad for that—the tears shed were all but a memory. Rydel was quiet. His slender elvin eyes, a piercing green, watched the staircase. His sharp ears pricked, as if hearing sounds her half-elf ears could not.

Karil joined his side. “What is it? What do you see?”

“I see them. They are coming.” Rydel turned. He grabbed her shoulders. “We must leave, now.”

“So soon,” she said, “Somehow I thought there would be more time. Is everything ready?”

Rydel grabbed her pack. “The horses are waiting in the stables. All that is required now is to get to them, from there I have cleared a path out of the woods.” She heard the unspoken message in his words. If we can make it there...

“How many?” she asked.

“A dozen in the halls, maybe more, and hundreds scattered around the grounds of the city.” She saw his hesitancy, as if he was afraid to speak the rest, “What we feared has come to pass. Dryan is seizing upon the chaos of your father’s murder. Elves are joining his side in droves. There will be hundreds, if not thousands looking for you soon. You are the only thing standing between Dryan and the throne now.”

“And what of our supporters?”

“Most are dead or swayed to his side.”

“Then Dryan has won,” she whispered.

“No. Not yet. It will not be long before the entire kingdom is crawling, and then all hope of escaping will be lost. But there is still a chance if we leave now.”

If all things good can go to ruin so quickly, what did it matter? Karil rested a hand upon the windowsill. “I can always trust you, can’t I Rydel?”

Rydel answered without hesitation. “Forever, my queen.” Karil tensed. The title was daunting, but somehow he made it sound true and good.

“Lead the way,” she ordered and he nodded.

They left her quarters and swiftly navigated their way through the labyrinth of halls, taking the least used routes. Though they moved quickly, they were high in the Spire, where all the nobility resided. They turned a corner and saw shadows nearing. They threw themselves against the wall. The shadows revealed themselves as servants trailing robed nobles. Karil breathed a sigh. For a moment she considered gathering them as allies. Judging by their robes that were shades of green, they were of the House of Nava, a staunch supporter of her father. She shook her head. No one could be trusted.

As they ran, she caught glimpses through wide windows of bright lights like dashing sprites in the night. Rydel abruptly pressed her against the wall. Karil waited, listening, the elf’s rock-like arm holding her in place. He pulled them back further, moving into a carved niche, tucked behind a standing vase of Merilian Silver. She looked but saw nothing. The halls were silent. Then, around the bend, something shifted. Karil’s breath caught as a guard in black elvin plate-mail appeared, as if melting from the wall. He had been hiding in plain sight. His eyes skimmed just past their hidden nook. At last, he moved down the hall. Now she knew what pursued them.

The Terma.

As a girl, she had both looked up to and been afraid of these elite guards that protected her father. Even back then, she would cling to

his leg when a Terma entered the room. Her father would simply stroke her hair as she trembled. The Terma lived and breathed their training, with the skill and agility of a hundred normal elves.

However, there was another rank, a secret echelon. The black-armored Terma were one rank below Rydel, and it was said that difference was the span of chasms. For there was no one higher than one of the Hidden, those who bore the hando cloak. But one against hundreds?

As they wove through the halls, she kept to Rydel's side, watching the dark corners. Four more times Rydel halted them. Each time a Terma slunk out of the shadows, always impossible to see until revealed.

At last, they reached the stables. Relief flooded her. She entered. The dawn light lit the rafters and stacks of hay.

Rydel returned, guiding their horses. She saw Rensha, her white mare, and was glad for the familiar face. She stroked the horse's muzzle and Rensha nickered. Rydel swiftly strapped down the saddlebags. She normally rode her cormac—faster and more intelligent creatures that were more attuned to the spark, but such a creature would be far too conspicuous beyond the gates and within Daerval, a land without magic.

Karil nimbly mounted Rensha. Rydel took to his large black warhorse and together they turned towards the wide archway when the ground rattled. Abruptly, the door behind burst open. Shards of wood rained down. Rensha spooked, bucking in terror and she fought to gain control of the frantic animal.

"Karil! Run!" Rydel shouted.

She slammed her heels into Rensha's flanks, bursting towards the open archway, but her charge was brought to a sudden halt as she was flung forward. When Karil gained her senses, she was on the ground. Twenty or so elves in black armor poured into the stables, surrounding them with silent, deadly ease. She saw the one that had flung her from her horse. He stood before her, tall and muscular. Where Rydel was broader of shoulder and arm, this elf was slender

like a blade, with long straight blond hair that draped over his shoulders. He held Rensha's reins casually with one powerful arm as the creature bucked. His other hand gripped a long, curved dagger. Karil swallowed with a rush of comprehension.

"So then, Dryan has no intention of letting me live," she said. The blond elf grinned, showing uncharacteristically human-like emotion. Karil's blood ran cold. "I see. That's clever of him, crushing all opposition here in the quiet, where the chaos will flow over and wash away his questionable deeds."

The elf sneered as he approached. "Oh, you misunderstand. You're not a threat to an elf like Dryan. Nevertheless, dead is always simpler than alive. Rumors are easy enough to quell. You have been too outspoken for your own good."

Anger rose inside Karil. "You're more of a fool than I thought," she replied. "Dryan has no claim to the throne, and never will. Who would ever believe him?"

The elf laughed openly. "You don't get it, do you? They will believe what we want them to believe."

Karil took a calm breath. She summoned her ka. It was weaker than most elves because of her half-blood, but undetectable for that same reason. In the corner of her vision she saw Rydel. Surrounded by ten other elves, he looked like a cornered tiger. He flashed her a look. She nodded. With a fierce cry, she lashed out, pulling every shred of her power into one invisible cord. A root from a nearby tree plunged upward through the thick ground, sending a shower of dirt into the air. Startled, the elf bounded backwards. He cut at the tubers, but the roots were quicker. They shot out, snaring his legs. The elf was thrown to the ground. At the same time, Karil leapt to her feet and bounded into Rensha's saddle.

Behind, she heard the cry and clash of Rydel with the other elves, but she didn't spare the time to look, trusting her companion. She bolted for the open door, when Rensha bucked again as if colliding with a brick wall. She turned and saw the blond elf held the reins. His face twisted, muscles cording with strain. Three more guards were approaching fast behind her. In one swift movement, she

unsheathed her slim dagger and slashed the elf's hand. He unleashed the reins with a cry and she broke free. Suddenly, Rydel was at her side, riding hard.

Twenty more elves alighted from thin air and she pulled her reins short. Too many, she thought.

A fierce battle cry rang through the clearing, and the Terma froze. Karil followed the sound, but saw nothing. When suddenly more elves burst from the woods. Her heart rose as she glimpsed their green armor. The two forces clashed and cries pierced the night. Green armor upon black, swords flickered like a blur. A Terma was thrown into Rensha's flank. The animal bucked wildly. She gripped the reins and clung to her mounts back. Through the haze of swords and tangle of Rensha's mane, she saw him once again.

The blonde Terma cut down a green armored shadow with menacing ease. The other elf fell to his knees clutching his chest, vainly trying to stop the flow of his gaping wound. The Terma lifted his sword to finish the job. Karil wasted no time. Holding Rensha's mane in one vise-like grip, she lunged for her dagger, hurling the blade. It flew over the crowds and sunk into his back, biting deep between his shoulder blades. She watched him fall and then unsheathed her sword and looked around, but in a matter of seconds, the fighting was over.

Bodies littered the ground, mostly the Terma. She turned to her defenders. Their breathing was heavy, faces ragged. They wore green cloth, loose and light with a few added pieces of leather armor, piecemealed together. It was the garb of the Lando, as they had started calling themselves. In the common tongue, it meant Liberators. Karil noticed the last subtle difference in their armor. Small trinkets the size of her finger were pinned to their breasts. She recognized them as the shattered pieces of her father's crown.

Rydel approached. "Are you all right?"

"Fine now."

Rydel looked to the elves, with a note of respect. "They saved us again. But the Terma are not done," he said. "You know as well as I,

that was only the first. More will be coming, and soon."

She nodded. The elves now stood in a file, all facing her. As one they clapped a hand to their chest, and spoke in unison, "Tel Merahas." Then they took to one knee, their armor rustling in the quiet night.

Her heart welled with pride and sorrow. Every one of them had abandoned everything to protect her, to protect the side of light against the tide of darkness. Her people. Most of them were young, but their youthful faces were far different than two days ago. Whatever softness had once been there had been hammered out. She regretted it all, feeling somehow that it was her fault. Yet such was the times, her father would have said. She swallowed, choking back her emotions. "Twice you have protected me. Words can never express my gratitude for your brave acts, both two days ago, and tonight." She let the words hang in the air. She felt Rydel's presence and knew the gap for their escape was closing, but it was because of these elves she had survived. The elves waited for her command, and she felt the weight of all their fates. "Time is short. I would wish to say more, and though I do not want to I, we must leave now."

"Then we will accompany you," said one, immediately standing.

"We will have your side," said another, a slightly older guard with longer ears and deeper-set eyes, but with equal fervor.

She shook her head firmly. "You all must stay. With Rydel, I can make it past the border. I would ask one more thing of you, as your queen." The words tasted bitter on her tongue, a taste she would gladly spit out for another. Her first order as queen was to strip them of their pride, but she knew she must. "You must forsake your pledge to me until I return. Furthermore, for now, you must wear your normal armor."

They looked hurt and confused.

She pointed to the small trinkets. "I know what it represents to you. You fought with great pride that day, but the honor you hold is not in some trinket upon your breast. Just as the power my father

wielded, and your love for him did not derive from the crown he bore. So please, spread the word: take up the normal armament of the guard, and assimilate back into the ranks." And live. She swallowed hard at the command. She knew she was doing it for them, but she also knew many of them might have chosen death, instead of losing their pride. And many of them had died. Yet she would not allow anymore, at least not because of her.

Karil felt Rydel, urging her to leave. She owed them one more thing... "Not far from now, where we stand, I will be back to take the throne, and on that day I will call for you to fight and take back what is rightfully ours." Pride returned to their faces.

"My queen," Rydel pressed. At the same time, Terma guards appeared like shadows from thin air, attacking from every angle, but the Lando charged.

"Sirvas!" they cried as one, cutting a path through the enemy. The dark armored Terma faltered, taken back by the sudden retaliation, but only for a moment, and the tide was quickly turning in favor of the dark elves.

A shout rose, "Run, my queen!"

One elf, the older of the bunch, gripped Rensha's reins in one hand. "Heed your own words. Live, my queen. One day we will see you again, and return the honor that has been stolen from you. I swear to you, we will not see your father, the true king, die in vain." He clasped a fist to heart and dove back into the fray. The Lando bellowed as they were sliced down, but still they fought.

"Karil!" Rydel shouted.

At last, guilt wrenching her, she turned, dashing through the opening they had created for her. Rensha's hooves pounded as she raced into the woods, away from her kingdom. Karil chased the image of Rydel's whipping cloak, heading towards Daerval, with the bloody cries of elves loud in her ears.

Chapter Fourteen

THE SHADOW'S HAND

Gray's legs burned as he followed the hermit's cloak through the night. The tree limbs seemed to reach out, lashing at him as a roar cracked through the woods. The forest was a blur as he ran. He skidded to a halt, nearly crashing into Mura. They stood in a small clearing. To his left was a sheer cliff with a view of the vast canopy of the lower woods, far below.

He slumped against a tree, catching his breath. "What's happening? Those things were vergs weren't they?" He shivered at even saying the name. Vergs were monstrous creatures, myths rumored to have lived during the Lieon, but no more than that.

Mura didn't seem to be listening. He moved as if searching for something. "It was here! It has to be," he muttered. He set down a strange scimitar that Gray hadn't seen until now with brown sheath and obsidian-like handle. The hermit's hands grazed the trunk of a silveroot. He tore into the brush at the base of the tree, ripping away clumps of tanglevine. Gray watched in confusion as the hermit's fingers pried into the tree's base, pulling away a perfectly square hunk of wood from the trunk and unveiling a dark cubbyhole.

He stepped forward. "How did you know that was there?"

"Because I created it, a long time ago, and have kept it concealed for a much needed time." Reaching in, Mura extracted a brown bag. "I will answer all, lad, but this is not the time. Now come forth."

Mura grabbed a handful of the forest floor, and then rubbed the soil between his palms. He then put a hand to Gray's head. The warmth of the man's palm against his temple was comforting. He opened his mouth when a bright light bloomed. It grew as Mura chanted in Elvish. A chill coursed through his body. "What did you do?" he asked. "That was..."

“Magic,” said Mura. “It’s not much, but it will hide your scent for five days, and buy you time to leave the woods.”

“But where will I go?”

“North and stop for nothing. Follow the Silvas River. It will lead you out of the woods and to safety. Once out, get to the town of Lakewood, and I will find you there. I swear it. But you must go now.” He picked up the bag and pressed it to Gray’s chest. “Here, take this.”

“What’s this?”

“Some of the answers to your past,” said the hermit, “Now, go! There isn’t much time.” The howls grew louder, emphasizing his words.

He unsheathed Morrowil from his back. “I won’t let you fight them alone. I can help.”

Abruptly, the woods darkened, and even the silver light from his sword dimmed. “Go!” Mura shoved him, withdrawing his blade.

Gray startled at sound like rushing air. A black mist appeared, and then vanished.

“What is that?”

“A creature not from this world,” Mura said.

Like dark lightning, the black mist leapt from one tree to another and a voice hissed from everywhere at once, “Handle them. Kill the boy and take the sssword.”

A figure stepped out from the shadows, head scraping the belly of the bent boughs.

Despite uneven shadows, Gray saw teeth like hand-length daggers jutting from a wide mouth.

“Run, boy! Now!”

Gray took a step backwards.

The verg gave a throaty laugh. “You should listen to your master,” it said, guttural voice rasping like a saw, as if it were not meant for speech.

“Flee!” Mura yelled.

Something flashed within the dark slits of trees. The shadows materialized, leaping towards him. He dove to the ground, pitching beneath a set of glistening fangs. His sword tip caught the dirt and was ripped from his grip. He turned to see a large black wolf. It turned its massive head, eyeing him with burnished red eyes. Gray’s heart hammered as he grasped for his sword. It was nowhere to be seen. He twisted, and in the pocket of his vision he glimpsed the blade. It was several feet behind him, teetering on the cliff’s edge.

Slowly, he edged towards it. In the corner of his vision, Mura leapt over the verg’s massive swipe, moving with incredible speed. As he looked back, the wolf lunged. Gray reached for his sword. As he gripped the handle, sharp teeth snatched his arm scraping against bare bone. He screamed in pain. Still, he gripped the sword and kicked at the beast, slamming his heel into its muzzle. The wolf didn’t budge, its teeth like iron pincers. It snarled and shook, ripping at his flesh. Gray gasped, pain blotting his vision when he saw trunk-like legs pounding towards him.

“No!” Mura cried out.

The verg’s huge hand seized Gray’s arm and heaved him into the air. He cried out, stretched between the wolf’s snarling jaws and the verg’s brutish grip. Mura dove, lashing at the verg, lacerating its trunk-like legs with his sword. The verg gave a bestial roar. The earth shuddered as its fist cracked the ground and shards of dirt flew. Gray’s body whipped like a wet rag. Through his agony, he felt the wolf’s teeth slip. He heard a loud pop and his vision clouded in pain, voice too hoarse to scream.

When his sight cleared, he saw Mura. The hermit was slumped against a cracked tree trunk. The verg eyed the hermit like a child playing with a broken doll. It turned its massive head. Gray closed

his eyes, feigning unconsciousness. “The boy is ours,” the verg rumbled.

Suddenly, something pressed against his back, digging into the root of his spine. His dagger .

“No, he belongs to her,” a voice replied, darker but far less booming than the verg. “She is his keeper.” Gray opened his eyes a fraction and saw the wolf. Its pale lips moved, snarling each word. The wolf speaks...

“She does not command us, beast,” the verg growled. “We answer only to the Rehass. We are the Shadow’s Hand. Flee to your mistress before I crush your bones where you stand.”

The wolf’s red eyes gleamed. “Perhaps I will bite off your flapping tongue and deliver that instead. Along with the boy’s body,” the wolf snapped, its snarl rising in intensity. “Give him to me.”

“Never,” the verg said, its deep growl shaking the ground. Gray’s heart slammed inside his own chest. His left hand dangled, painstakingly he inched it closer to his concealed dagger.

“The boy’s alive!” the wolf snarled and lunged for his leg.

Gray reached for his dagger, but the verg moved quicker. The beast swiped at the wolf, protecting its bounty. Struck by the mighty fist, the wolf yelped, skidding to the cliff’s edge. At the same time, Gray unleashed a cry of rage. Ignoring the stunning shards of pain, he grabbed his hidden dagger. He whipped it around and slammed it into the verg’s fist, piercing its thick hide. The verg howled in rage, then flailed. But Gray held on. He sliced down, cutting bone and tendon. The beast roared. With its free hand, the verg gripped him around the waist, and threw him with a grunt.

Gray was ripped from the dagger and he catapulted through the air. He hit the ground, skidding towards the cliff like a pebble across water. His fingers clawed the ground, but it was useless. The last thing he saw was Mura’s horrified face as he slipped over the edge and beyond, falling towards a sea of trees.

Chapter Fifteen

A JOURNEY FORWARD

Blinding white flickered across the darkness. Light... the notion skittered across a distant field of thoughts—each thought like a tiny flame dancing in the darkness of Gray's mind. He drifted back towards slumber and darkness when a voice sounded through the gloom. Wake up! He ignored it, but it spoke again, Sleep is for the weak and the dead.

Am I dead? he asked the voice.

Not yet. Now rise.

Gray let the distant light fill him and his eyes opened to the blinding brightness.

Suddenly the fall and all else came back to him in a rush. He gasped as if water filled his lungs and he was drowning. Gradually, his breaths slowed.

With pebbled dirt beneath his cheek, the world appeared as if seen through thick glass. High above, he gazed upon a screen of branches. A canopy. His eyes adjusted to the bright light, and he saw broken branches and a hole in the awning. His mind reeled. How am I alive? He propped himself upon his elbow and his arm burst in a fountain of pain. A jagged gash ran down his left arm. He recalled the scene with the wolf. The wound was peeled back at the surface, looking like gnarled lip, and congealed blood covered the gaping cut. He winced. "I'll have to clean it soon," he voiced aloud, looking around for a stream or nearby brook.

Suddenly, he remembered his sword and fear ran through him. He turned and spotted it beside a nearby tree. Relief flooded him.

He rose to get the blade and throbbing pain wrenched his other shoulder. Gently, he rolled it, and sucked in a sharp breath. It felt

detached. He looked around in uncertainty, when a memory flashed. Stumbling to his feet, he hobbled to a thick oak. A strange, familiar calm came over him. At the height of his exhale he rammed his shoulder into the tree's trunk. There was a loud pop and pain bloomed before his eyes, but when it cleared he could move his arm again. He smiled in relief, but knew the hermit had not taught him that.

"Mura," he whispered and memory of the hermit flooded through him. The last image he had was of Mura slumped against a tree.

He moved towards the cliff and placed his hands to the looming mountain of stone and dirt. Mura had told him to escape the woods and quickly. I will do as promised. I can pass through the woods easily enough following the Silvas River. Once he reached the trading city of Lakewood, he would find safety and wait for Mura. Five days before the spell wears off, he reminded himself. Five days until I see Mura again.

Snatching up his sword, he found a nearby stream and rinsed his wound. The clear, crystal water rinsed over the deep cut. As he ignored the pain, a leaf flashed in his mind's eye. He paused curiously when a fish darted among the rock bed, and his stomach growled. When the cut was clean, but in need of a bandage, he made his way back to the clearing, hunting for his bag, but after a while his spirits sank.

"It's gone..."

He leaned against a tree and looked up. There, dangling from a nearby bough was his bag. That should do for now, he thought when he finished wrapping his arm, admiring his handiwork.

Famished, he set aside two red apples and a hunk of orange cheese wrapped in waxy cloth. He finished his meal quickly. With the tang of cheese still on his tongue, he wished for more, but already he knew he would have to ration it out if he were to survive. He began to rise when he caught a flash of silver.

Gray reached into his pack and withdrew his hand. A silver pendant glinted in his palm, and he remembered what Mura had said about

the pack containing an object from his past. The pendant was divided in parts by lines, and in each part, was a symbol.

The eight symbols of the Great Kingdoms. The hair on his arms stood on end. “There is one missing,” he said, remembering the emblem of wind that Mura had shown him in the cabin; and he realized the curious tome the hermit had bestowed upon him was now likely gone forever...

His grip tightened on the pendant and magically the two halves of the metal twisted as if on hinges, and then snapped whole once again. Now four of the symbols were on one side, and four were on the other. He twisted it once again. Now two showed. The pendant’s surface glinted.

If the stories were right, the kingdoms held different strengths. Perhaps... He twisted it again, trying to order them from most powerful to least. Aside from wind, sun was the most powerful, so the stories said. Then forest. Sun, forest, fire, ice, stone, moon, metal, flesh. Twisting, Gray lost himself to the symbols, until the last one clicked in place. He gave a triumphant smile, revealing the eight symbols of the Great Kingdoms in order of power. Abruptly, all the symbols vanished in a wave of light.

In their place, was the emblem of wind.

The pendant grew hot and he threw it to the ground as a sudden light flared from the pendant, lighting the clearing in a flash of brilliant gold. He approached. It was warm now, no longer hot, and he twisted it once. The glow vanished and all the symbols returned to the way they were. All eight.

He shook his head and laughed aloud. He looked up, as if expecting someone to see what he had just done, but he was alone. The clearing was empty. A small breeze emphasized his solitude. Gray went to put the pendant back in the pack when his hand halted, and he slipped it around his neck, tucking it beneath his shirt.

He strapped his sword to his back then slung his pack over his shoulder, looking towards the early morning sun. With a last glance behind, he moved out of the clearing, into the forest, and onward.

Towards Lakewood, wondering what was around the next bend.

Chapter Sixteen

LEGENDS

Vera left the camp and walked east.

Her boots crunched on the dry leaves, peeking out from her dark dress. A modest collar revealed faint green veins on her slender neck and chest. The dress was well fitted, flaunting her perfect curves. A strip cut from the side revealed glimpses of her pale, slender legs. It was something she wouldn't have worn in the Citadel, but she was altogether different now.

Above, the canopy was thick. It was part of the reason hiding from him had been easier, but it made it difficult to tell the time of day. Between the branches she caught hints of the brightening moon.

Her meeting with her companion should be now.

Not far behind, her niux made camp within a small clearing. The contrast between the inviting woods and her cruel, nightmarish beasts almost made her smile.

Two massive vergs, even larger than the rest, were constructing a crude fire, snapping huge limbs from nearby trees. Though fairly intelligent creatures, they looked almost awkward with the act. The beasts ate their meat raw and saw better than most creatures in the night. She had told them to build it without explanation, for she knew the shadows were not only their allies. While they hunted, he also hunted in the darkness. Meanwhile, the others, six saeroks, tall lanky beasts made of raw sinew and thin hair, and four other hulking vergs fought over the remains of their last kill, tearing and shredding into the disgusting carcass of a werebear. She put the noise and commotion of the camp out of her head, dismissing it, when the woods rustled. She stopped.

"You can come out now."

The biggest wolf she had ever seen stalked out of the shadows. It stopped in the middle of her path. “Mistress,” it snarled, dark fur ruffling in the wind.

Sitting on its haunches the wolf stared her in the eyes, now of equal height. She knew that her attitude, and the lack of fear she emanated was part of her control over the beast. If she let it waver, she wondered if the creature would attack her, or if they had gone beyond that. So close, she sadistically imagined the creature lunging and she knew its speed. She imagined her neck caught in its vicious teeth, the press of its barbed teeth on her soft skin.

“You’re late, my pet,” she replied.

The wolf bowed its head lower.

She continued walking and the creature slipped in at her side like a shadow. “Speak, precious, what news of the boy?”

“The boy...” it growled.

“Yes?” she questioned, turning to look. Already, disappointment spiraled through her and it began the moment she sensed Drefah’s presence. The boy was not here and neither was the sword, and that was all that mattered. All else was worthless news.

Suddenly the forest shifted, and a wind tore through the woods, wracking the trees and howling. If Vera had a pulse, it would have quickened. She sensed Drefah’s fear as well, watching the hackles rise on its massive body. “What is that foul smell?” the wolf asked.

She eyed the woods calculatingly. “It’s him.”

“Who?”

The muscles in her jaw twitched. “Kail. The legend.”

Drefah had no idea who she spoke of, but his snarled heightened. He took her words seriously, as he should. The frightening bay of wind grew louder. Though in reality, it wasn’t the sound, but the feel of the wind. It felt powerful. More powerful than all of them. Her pet’s snarl grated her nerves, and the mere thought of him

vexed her.

Vera turned and saw the same fear echoing through the camp behind her. Vergs stiffened and saeroks loped, climbing trees as they watched the woods in fright. It bothered her that she had weeded out every single coward from the bunch and still they trembled like barn mice at his presence. Granted, he had killed four of them already. Not to mention, their fear was instilled in their blood, something born in the Great War, but it still annoyed her, like a sharp splinter she couldn't pry from beneath her skin.

"Tell me how you lost the boy," she said.

"A Nameless and its niux, under orders of the Great One, tried to steal the boy. But in the process, the boy was flung over the side of a great cliff. The fall would have killed any human. I searched, but found nothing, not even a scrap of his scent." The wolf sounded especially irritated about the last part. Its large ears wilted as it spoke, as if it had failed her, and it had, though not entirely.

"It is not your fault, my pet," she said softly. It seemed appropriate, and her hand absently grazed its waist-height black fur. "They hid his smell with the spark. The old man did. It was nothing you could do." She scooped a handful of dirt and let it fall to the ground. Simple magic, she thought with a slim, but impressed smile. She looked up, glimpsing the bright moon through the canopy. "I underestimated them, this time. The one who cast the spell was not from this land. I should have anticipated that the prophecy did not reach the Great One's ears only. I had heard whisper of a prophet from Eldas, a human-blooded cur, but dismissed it as rumor. The man was likely sent as his guardian from beyond the black gates with the knowledge of the prophecy." She did not mention that she had heard that the prophet was the queen, and her death a timely, fortunate part of the Great One's ultimate plan. Sometimes she wondered if his plans were the result of coincidence or much more.

The wolf growled in affirmation. "It is as you say. The old man did not move like any human I have seen. He might be elf blood."

Vera shrugged. "Elves, humans, it does not matter. The man's power is minimal, but his knowledge is what I fear. We must

assume now that he knows everything about the power of the sword and the boy."

"But, mistress, the boy is dead."

"No," she hissed. It was the first time emotion had entered her voice and the wolf flinched under her hand. "The boy is alive. He will not die until I twist the blade in him with my own hands." Her fingers clenched, grasping his fur. "I want to feel my dagger slide into his heart as I watch the life vanish from his eyes."

"Why do you hate him? He is a mere human," the wolf said.

She turned to the massive wolf, her violet eyes flashing dangerously. "I don't. He was everything in the world to me once."

"And now?"

"Now he simply stands between me and the sword," she stated matter-of-factly. "And the sword will be mine." Nothing would deprive her of that. Not a fall, or the Great One, not legends. Not even you Kirin. She turned with a wicked smile. "Do not fret, my pet. I know where he is heading, and the boy does not know the darkness of what he holds. We shall see him soon."

The wind howled, and this time she laughed, answering the legend's call, power filled her voice, overwhelming the sound of the wind.

Chapter Seventeen

Strange Paths

Gray watched the bright woods as if it were a cutpurse or murderer. In the distance, he heard the gurgle of the Silvas River, often called the Sil, reassuring him of his path. Something glinted ahead.

As he turned the bend, he saw a moss-covered stone spiraling heavenward. Could it be? He wondered, remembering the stories of the watchtowers of old.

Mura had told him of ancient towers that were placed all over Daerval in order to watch, night and day, for The Return. The idea of an ancient watchtower made his heart quicken. A time not long after the Ronin walked the earth, he thought. It was followed by the fearful question. And do they again?

Gray stone jutted from the earth, touching the forest's high canopy. Moss, roots, and tanglevines covered its surface.

He neared in wonder. Throwing off his pack, he grabbed hold of the nearest tanglevine, tearing it from the statue's face. He worked quickly and soon enough, he pried the last gnarled vine from the stone. He wiped his damp brow and took a step back.

Five spires shot from the ground. Each were approximately the same size, except for the fifth one, which was shorter and stouter. He made out the wrinkled grooves at the knuckles and the slender curvature of veins as thick as his own forearm.

"A hand the size of a giant," he whispered in astonishment.

His tired legs wobbled beneath him, and he decided this was as good a place as any to stop. After a quick lunch beneath the shade of the hand, he continued. He left the statue, eyeing the relic one last time as he turned the bend. Gray halted. Straight ahead, the woods forked into two paths. Nothing he remembered from Mura's

tales mentioned the road splitting.

Reaching the split, he slowed. The familiar sound of the Sil was gone. Running back, he searched for the statue, but it was nowhere, as if the woods had shifted, and panic roiled through him.

He was lost.

Overhead, thunder cracked, promising a storm to shake the land.

** *

Rain came in sheets, cleaving the canopy, and falling on Gray's makeshift shelter.

He had made camp beneath a marmon tree. Mura always called marmons the safe haven for the wayward traveler, for the hollow trunk and awning-like branches was a perfect shelter.

Cold and hungry, he pulled flint from his pack and sparked it against a stone, but with no luck. He eyed his sword at his side. The blade glinted through the cloth bundle. Curious, he grabbed it and struck the flint against the flat of the sword. Sparks flew, lighting the tinder. He laughed in success and saw the blade had not even a scratch.

Gnawing on a hunk of bread, Gray eyed the two trails, waiting to be chosen. He looked away, stoking the fire with a stick. He knew he should sleep, but he wasn't tired. Instead, the fire of purpose burned in his gut. At last, he walked into the downpour to stand before the two trails. One path was shrouded in cobwebs, the other paved with green moss.

"Often what is darkest, is that which pretends to be light," he quoted, remembering the words from the one of the tales of the Ronin. Mura told him people from beyond the forest said the Lost Woods were alive; that it had a mind of its own. But the woods had never betrayed him before.

The pendant grew warm. He pulled it from his shirt and it glowed silver. Curious, he stepped forward, lighting both paths in a silver tint. Rain soaked his hair and skin. He closed his eyes and held the

pendant before him, following a strange instinct.

When he opened his eyes the pendant's leather thong was parallel to the ground, as if pulled by a fierce wind towards the darker path. In wonder, he took a step toward the cobwebbed trail. The pendant pulsed as if in agreement. With a laugh of triumph, he snuffed his campfire, strapped on his sword and pack, and then plunged into the waiting trail.

Darkness enveloped him. What he could see, he almost wished he couldn't. Enormous webs hung from tree to tree, blending with the mist, from which spiders clung, each bigger than his fist. They scuttled as he passed, but he continued. At last, shreds of light pierced the darkness and he realized that night had turned to morning.

The day wore on, the light faded again. With the return of night, the spiders crawled from the trees, watching him with red eyes. Twice, a thick web blocked his path and he pulled his blade free, cutting it down. Once, a spider fell upon his shoulder and he knocked it free, running until his legs burned; but still he jumped when a branch brushed his shoulder. He distracted himself by cutting a notch on his leather belt, marking the passing days. Two days, he counted now, starting from the day he fell from the cliff. He had to keep track of time. Five days until the spells wears off, he reminded himself. Which means, I only have three more to make it out of the woods. He marched through mist, web, and vine. As he walked, his wound itched fiercely. He wanted to check it. It's healing, something told him, and he trusted it.

Gray moved as if he could see Lakewood around the bend. Only when his legs could move no more, he stopped; but only to kindle quick fires for a few short hours of sleep. In the light of the small fire, he nibbled on a small hunk of cheese, or sliver of dried meat; but his rations dwindled quickly, and each time his gut felt more empty than last. Worst of all, he dreaded sleep and the inevitable nightmares.

Always his dreams involved Mura. Most times he was back in the clearing where he had left the hermit. Mura would cry out, and each time Gray would turn and flee. Other times, he would see the

misshapen image of Mura's head on a pike, eyes glazed in horror. Being awake was not much better.

Several times, a strange mist rose from the soil. It was so thick he could barely breathe, and he would scramble off the trail into the underbrush. Sword clutched to his chest, he listened to animal-like howls and cries. At last, exhaustion overtook him, and he slept restlessly until the mist of morning announced the dawn.

Gray awoke from one of those mornings. It was a particularly frightening night with snarls that sounded in his ear. It was still raining and he felt as if his clothes were now permanently attached to his soaked skin. Still groggy, he glanced down. Barely an arms-length away, imprinted in the mud was a head-sized cloven hoof-print. He tensed, peering through the foliage. Overhead, thunder cracked. It shook the woods like the rumble of a giant. He glanced to his leather belt.

Five notches, he realized, today will make the sixth. He was out of time. A shiver traced his spine. What if I'm on the wrong path? What if I've wasted all this time? He hadn't heard a murmur of the Sil either, not once, and that was his only way out. He shook his head and cast the thoughts aside. No, he would trust the pendant.

More thunder roiled above, sounding closer. Gray looked up. Another storm was brewing, and something told him, this would be far worse than all the others. He unsheathed the sword from his back and rose, moving forward.

Into the thickening mist.

Chapter Eighteen

THE HAWK

Karil rubbed her hands before the red flames. They made camp on the desert, just outside a ruined town. The nearby trees cast shadows on the flat land. She watched them out of the corner of her eye, reassuring herself that they were not creatures standing still in the night.

“Find anything?” she asked, noticing Rydel had slipped into the camp like a shadow and now stood beside a nearby tree. The elf threw a cloth bundle on the ground and she unfolded it.

Rydel held up a small root. “This’ll be enough for me. The rest is yours.”

She eyed several shriveled roots the color of dirt, and a green head of leaves. Grabbing a long root, she nibbled on it. It was bitter, nothing like she had ever tasted in Farhaven. She thought of the farms of Eldas. What she wouldn’t give for a lignin fruit, head-sized melons that hung from small trees or the crisp tang of moonroots plucked on the twelfth night of every moon. She took another bite. At least it was edible. It had been two fortnights since they had left Eldas and her heart panged with thoughts of her home.

“What’s bothering you?” Rydel asked.

“Nothing.”

“It is a strange thing when you lie,” he said. “It is truly not elvin.”

She said nothing, staring into the flames as she ate.

“I understand your sorrow,” he said softly.

“Do you? Or is caring for those you loved simply my human side as well?” She regretted the words immediately. It wasn’t Rydel’s fault. But sourness gnawed at her insides like a poison.

The elf looked pained. “I did not mean to offend. I loved your father, too.”

She shook her head, feeling a fool, and touched his arm. “I know you did. Forgive me.”

“By tomorrow, we will see Lakewood, and your uncle,” he said, changing the subject.

The thought lifted her spirits. For a moment, she wondered how different Mura would appear after two years outside the realm of magic. It was said that ten years within Farhaven was the equivalent of one year within Daerval. “And even more pressing, we will finally see the boy of prophecy,” she said. “My mother was right, as always. I was forced beyond the Gates. Now I must continue to follow her words. I must watch over the boy, and ensure his survival.”

“And how will you do that?” Rydel asked. “We’ve seen the destruction the enemy has wrought. He may already be in danger.”

Karil couldn’t deny the truth of that. Upon their journey, they had come across barren towns, and ruined villages, each more horrifying than the last. Fear for the boy’s safety wormed its way beneath her skin like a deep cold.

Suddenly there was a disturbance in her ka. Rydel turned, seeing it in the darkness before she could. The air distorted with the flutter of wings. Come, she beckoned in her thoughts.

From out of the darkness, a hawk appeared, landing upon her pack. It was a beautiful creature, even in the dim light, large with golden plumage, slightly ruffled by its sudden change in course. It eyed her regally.

“Sa mira, kin ha elvia su nivia,” she whispered, enjoying the feel of her language as it flowed across her tongue. At her words, the bird leapt into the air and landed upon her arm. Its sharp claws gripped her harmlessly. She smiled and the hawk tilted its head, listening attentively. She touched the bird’s side calmly, closing her eyes. Save the boy, she implored. Watch over him. But aloud she voiced,

“Tervias su unvas. Remlar uvar hil.”

The bird twisted its head, as if in acknowledgement and then flew off.

“At least now we will have eyes on him,” she answered, watching the creature fly away until it was obscured by the dark night. Attuned to the spark, the creature knew her words. But it was still the bird’s choice to follow her. The bird had answered simply. It would obey her command unto death.

“Get some rest, my queen,” Rydel said.

“I will take first watch,” she replied, eyeing the nearby trees again. When Rydel looked ready to argue, she raised a brow. “That’s an order.” The elf grumbled, and settled beneath his dark green blanket, asleep in moments, sleeping dreamlessly as full elves did. The notion of dreams gave Karil a shiver. Her watch was not wholly altruistic. She feared her dreams and would do anything to stave them off for as long as she could. She huddled closer to the red flames that warded off the cold night. With thoughts of the boy and her uncle, she looked south, praying to see Lakewood soon.

Chapter Nineteen

THE GATHERING DARK

Thick plumes of smoke obscured the red moon. The screams had finally settled.

Vera had traveled quickly to make it here. The message had been clear. Come or die. And she valued her life, greatly. It was perhaps the only thing she did value anymore.

She paused outside the inn, feeling the warm glow of the common room on her back. She looked down. The once-thick snow was now trampled flat by thousands of cloven hooves and stained crimson. Her fur-lined coat was covered in blood as well. She threw the coat to the snow, embracing the cold, and stepped to the side, out of the light.

Vergs and saeroks stalked past, joining the swelling army. Her cool glare panned up, and even she had trouble keeping her features smooth.

Wreathed in shadows, the nine sat on deathless steeds. Beasts that made Drefah look tame. Those dead eyes were rimmed in red that writhed with maggots, and hides as black as a moonless night. The beasts appeared as if crudely put together, patches of flesh missing from the animal's torsos, exposing their white ribs. Steam flared from their nostrils and their hooves beat against the ground with power.

The Kage.

"Is it done?" the leader asked, the closest of the nine. His voice was like a claw raking inside her ear.

"Yes," Vera answered. "All the inhabitants of Tir Re' Dol are dead, except for the one. I gave him the message and he will relay it. You can be sure of that," she couldn't help but smile. With the fear she

had inspired in him, their pawn would ride until his eyes burned and the horse fell beneath him. “We left him a beast to ride, but it will take him some time until he alerts the rest of Daerval.”

“Good,” said the nightmare. “Then it is finished.”

“However,” she paused. The nightmare turned again, and she almost regretted her words. Still her driving need for knowledge overrode her better judgment. Her voice gained strength. “What’s the point? Why warn the prey before the kill?”

A dark hood hid its features, but she felt as if the nightmare was smiling, as if it knew her hunger for knowledge. It squared to her. The jutting spike on its metal pauldron—differentiating it from the other eight of its kind—was the length of her whole arm. Its black cloak wavered as it took a step forward, red snow crunching beneath its plated boot. It took another, and still she remained motionless, until it stood towering head and shoulders over her. She looked into the nightmare’s hood, but saw only darkness. Still she knew that arrogant smile was there.

“Do you fear me?” It asked calmly.

“Yes,” she replied. Her voice was smoother than she anticipated, but the words stung. There was no use lying. She didn’t know what the other eight Kage would do, and it was almost certain death, but she wouldn’t let him lay a hand on her.

“Not nearly enough.”

She swallowed. “You didn’t answer my question.”

It laughed, or what she hoped was laughter. “It will do them no good. It is the Great One’s wish that they know their demise. A week is no matter. Besides, it will take us several days here. We have things to do still,” it said, and she knew that smile turned wicked. “There are still several towns within the mountains to destroy before we finish the southern lands.”

“But why? They will know of your arrival, and if they have any wits about them, they’ll flee.” She was careful of her tone, trying not to

bite off each word. The fools. He'll slip right through their fingers.

"Fleeing serves no purpose without the key. And if they flee with it? Then they run right into our hands."

Vera released a hidden breath as it turned its back; at the same time, she glimpsed its true features and saw merciless scarlet eyes. She sunk to one knee, pressing a fist to the snow. Head bowed, she was glad they could not see her teeth grind in fury. "Am I done?" she asked.

The nightmare turned and its cloak, edged in blood, flung behind him.

"Burn it all, than you may take your leave."

She coiled with restrained lust. Her hands rose at her sides, a pale glow surrounding them and she shook with power. She threw them to the sky and the inn ignited, sending flares into the night air. She unleashed a fierce cry, and fire roared to life, consuming all it touched.

At her feet, a man held a small girl. She watched the two corpses burn. Holes were torn through their abdomens. Such a shame. The fool girl and her father would have lived, if only for a while longer, had they not run to her for help. The thought sparked an idea and she knew how to get Kirin. Oh, Kirin, your luck has run out. Soon you will be leaving the safety of the woods and I will be waiting. The sword and its power will be mine.

She walked through the huge gate, flames hot on her back. Ahead, her niux waited. To the east, she spotted the tail of the dark army, leaving the city as well, roving towards its next kill. Vera's boots left red prints in the fresh snow, as she approached her niux.

"We follow the Kagehass?" A verg rumbled, watching the dark caravan.

Drefah growled. Aside from her pet, none were allowed to speak. The huge leathery skinned creature knew it too. At any other time she would cut its tongue from its mouth, but instead she answered,

“We do not.” The beasts trundled. To disobey the Kage was a fate worse than death.

“Then where to, mistress?” A saerok rasped. It stood on the balls of its feet in the thick snow. Standing several feet taller than her, its patchy fur ruffled in the wind.

“We go south,” she told her dark army, “towards Lakewood, and towards the sword.”

Chapter Twenty

A FIRE LIT WITHIN

Gray's pulse beat in time with the flickering flames. The fire raged before his closed lids, pushing back the shadows in the quiet glade.

Cross-legged on the ground, the leaf sat in his mind's eye, but it was not what he sought. A swirling ball of air flashed. He reached for it, but it retreated, racing away. This time he didn't let it go. Eyes clenched, he followed it, pushing into his consciousness. The ball of air was just beyond his reach. He reached out. Pain shot through his limbs as he ran into a wall. His concentration wavered, but he held on, bashing against the wall. At last, it shattered. His eyes opened, returning to the real world. His heart raced as he took in his surroundings.

Before him, the fire still burned. Shadows danced in the trees, as if waiting to move into his small camp. But everything seemed different. His world was crisper, sharper.

Slowly, he stood, confused but calm. He was soaked in sweat. It rolled down his limbs as he reached for his sword that stuck upright. He gripped the handle. It had never felt more right.

He inhaled deeply. With two breaths, he gained control of his breathing, something he had never done before, but somehow knew he could. Still, his heart beat wildly. There was nothing but his body and the sword.

Heron Rises on One Leg, a voice whispered, and the sword parried an unseen blow. Without slowing, he twisted the blade, disarming the shadow opponent, and striking. Crane's Beak. Before the strike was finished, his left leg circled, raising a fan of dirt as he swept the opponent's legs. Ten Moon. He switched his grip stabbing behind. His muscles flexed in the last moment, power resonating through the flashing blade as the sword snapped to a halt. Setting Sun. With a cry, he spun, pivoting in a full-circle and cutting down a charge of

unseen foes. Still, he was moving. Wind Dances in the Reeds. With the momentum of the spin, he dove into a fluid roll, cutting left and right at the enemy's legs. Tempest's Fury. Gray unleashed a cry as he pounded his feet against the ground, and sprung backwards. He flipped, head over heels. His back arched as he landed on his feet, and drove the sword down with all his might, and slammed it into the ground.

His breath challenged the fire's crackle. Again, he stilled it in a matter of seconds.

His limbs shook, but inside he was calm. He eyed his camp and saw his pack showered in dirt, and the ground torn up.

His hand trembled, but not in fear. "My memory is coming back."

Unwinding his bandaged arm, he saw only smooth skin. The wound had healed. Cautiously, he reached into his mind. The swirling ball of air came forth and his world expanded. Suddenly, he smelled a rabbit as it raced down a game trail. No. He felt it. He reached out and his mind shifted.

He sniffed the air, wet nose twitching as he smelled for danger. Nothing. He continued, moving through the grass, searching for tender stalks. He hopped closer, nibbling at a leaf, eyes flitting all the while. Suddenly, he froze. His muscles stiffened, fur ruffling from a sudden wind. His heart hammered faster. DANGER. The sensation flooded him. He leapt, pounding through the brush. SAFETY. AHEAD. The words were short and simple. Feelings, not whole, concrete thoughts. His heart beat harder and he saw the tangle of brush, taking a final leap and—

Gray gasped loudly, breaking from his trance and staggering backwards. He reached for his sword, looking up and behind him. He clutched his racing heart. His heart. "What was that? It's as if I was dying..."

There was a fluttering sound and he turned. Perched upon a branch, was a hawk. Its head swiveled and he followed its gaze. Upon the stone, beside the fire, was the carcass of a rabbit and his hunger surged. "Is that for me?" the hawk tilted its head. "All I've had to

eat is dried meat and cheese, you have no idea how hungry I am." A few minutes over the flame and... He reached out a hand and touched the rabbit's soft fur, when a flash of pain ran through him. He leapt back as if stung. His hand appeared unscathed, and yet it felt as if he had just put it to the flames.

"I had its sight, smell, and feelings ripped from me as you caught it," he said. "I must still feel its pain." He shook his head, turning. "It's all yours. I'm not as hungry as I thought. Go on." The hawk seemed to understand and swooped in, tearing up the small animal.

He turned his head, unable to watch, and then sat down on a nearby rock, staring into the flames. He wished Mura were here. He glanced sidelong at the hawk as it ate. "I suppose you don't know what's happening do you?" The hawk finished its meal and was now cleaning itself, watching him. He marveled, wondering why the bird still stayed. "Perhaps you're lost like me," he mused, and then paused. "You need a name. How about Maris? He's one of the Ronin. My favorite, aside from Kail of course. He was quick and sharp too, not to mention the most unpredictable of the bunch. Sounds like you, right?"

The bird ruffled its brown and gold-tinged feathers.

"No? Well, how about Motri? I had... something named that once when I was younger, I think," he said with a half-hearted smile. The bird squawked, louder this time and unexpectedly flew closer, alighting upon the pommel of his sword. Gray's smile deepened. He took it for agreement. "Good, then it's settled! Motri it is."

Motri squawked again. He laughed when suddenly the bird gave a fierce cry, and flapped its wings. "What is it?" Motri continued to flap his wings, and then took off in a flash of feathers. "What did I say?" he whispered, and then looked up and froze.

A figure stood in the darkness. In its hand a black blade gleamed.

Gray's own sword stood upright, paces in front of him. Two steps, he calculated, heart pounding. His vision flickered up to the figure. It hadn't moved. It looked like just another shadow, but it was surely there. I can reach it, he thought, eyes rooted on his sword.

He looked straight into the dark outline and lunged. A flurry of wind rushed over him. The figure stood, an arm's length away, spanning the gap in the blink of an eye. The man towered, shrouded in a frayed cloak, face hidden by a dark cowl. Fear roiled through Gray.

"Let go," the man ordered in a deep rasp.

Gray shivered, but held onto the sword. "Who are you?"

"I won't ask again. Let go."

"No. Not until you tell me who you are." The man gripped his wrist. Gray pulled at the sword and a tremor of pain shot through him. He cried, falling to his knees. Something beckoned inside his mind. The swirling ball of air. He let it come. Tempest's Fury, it whispered, filling him with power and confidence. He rose.

"Stay down," the man seethed.

Gray's body was smashed to the earth by an invisible force, his breath forced from his lungs. He tried to rise, but his whole body felt coated in stone. He saw wisps of wind. They layered his body, flowing over his limbs. "What is this?" he cursed.

Calmly, the cloaked man reached for Gray's sword and gasped. The man's arm shook as he pulled the blade from the ground. "You're a child playing with something you don't understand. Something you can't even begin to understand." The man ran two fingers along the blade's surface. Gray watched in wonder as the sword changed. Darkness flowed over the blade. The cloaked man knelt before his face and the blade's point flashed before his eyes. "Master the sword. Do not let it master you."

"Who are you?" Gray whispered.

The man stood silently, and within his hood, Gray glimpsed a flicker of color. Scarlet red eyes. With a gust of wind, white clouds swirled and the man vanished, and Gray's bonds fell. Shaken, he rose to his feet and eyed the woods. He wiped his cheek, feeling a thin line of blood.

She’s coming, the wind hissed. Gray twisted as leaves crunched in the near distance.

Chapter Twenty-One

KIRIN

“Kirin...” the whisper, sifted through the glade. Gray tried to track its origin. He glanced to the sword. It had returned to its normal silvery sheen. He snatched it, clutching it in both hands. There was a rustle and he twisted.

There, standing at the edge of the woods, was a woman.

She had a slender frame, and wore a simple black dress. It more than hinted at her lean body. She stood coolly. His eyes panned up, taking in her raven black hair and then her face. She was beautiful.

“Hello, Kirin.” Her voice was as familiar as a lover.

Gray shook his head and stepped back. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?” He gripped his sword tighter.

“You don’t remember me?”

He searched her face. “I’m sorry,” he admitted at last. “How do I know you?”

She stepped closer. Gray raised his sword and its sheen flared bright for a moment.

“Really, Kirin? You would harm me? Have you changed that much?”

Danger, a voice warned. “Stay back,” he said, more bluntly.

She bit her bottom lip. “I’m not armed. See for yourself,” she turned full circle, showing off her perfect curves. The dress was even more form fitting in the back. “No?” Fine then. You always were stubborn.” Confidently, she reached down and pulled back her skirt to expose her thigh and its flawless pale skin, higher and higher.

“Enough!” he shouted at last, throwing out a hand, then more calmly, “Just... stay there.”

She looked up, dropping the skirt. “I’m not armed, Kirin,” she said. “And you should know I would never hurt you.”

The simple name struck a chord. “Why do you keep calling me that? That’s not my name.”

“I see. What do you call yourself now then?”

“My name is Gray.”

“Interesting.” Again, she said the words as if he were playing a game. It was infuriating.

“And yours?” he asked.

“Vera,” she replied. “As always.”

He shrugged. “Sorry, it doesn’t ring any bells. Your face is familiar, that much I’ll admit.”

“If my face is familiar, I’m curious why your eyes are spending so much time on the rest of me.”

“What do you want?” he asked, changing the subject and raising his sword.

Vera took a step forward, slowly, assuredly, and then another. “To talk,” she said.

He followed the fluid sway of her hips. She took another step, and the tip of his sword pressed against her pale throat. A pinpoint of blood formed. He hesitated and Vera pressed the sword away. “See? That’s not so bad.”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you is the better question?” Vera said. “What happened to your memory?”

“I… I lost it.”

“Curious… I wonder how… I suppose you don’t remember that as well?”

He shook his head. “Only bits and pieces. It happened several years ago.”

“I see,” Vera said. “Well then, I’m a friend of yours from another life. We were very close in fact.” Truth rang in her voice. She knew about him.

“How close?”

She smiled with a light in her eyes. “Very.”

He swallowed. “You’ve still yet to prove anything. Do not think I’ll trust you blindly. I’ve lost my memories, not my mind.”

She laughed and it stirred his blood. “Kirin’s fire still burns within you it seems.” She approached and snatched his wrist, too fast for him to react. But he didn’t retract. Instead, he watched as she twisted his hand in her cold fingers and pulled back his sleeve to expose his black marking. She grabbed her own sleeve and pulled it back. A black insignia was scrawled across her wrist. It was the same mark. “Do you trust me now?” she asked.

A vision filled his mind. A woman stood in a courtyard of green and he stood beside her while others trained. The woman turned to look at him. It was her. “I remember,” he whispered and gripped her arm. “Why are you here? This place is not safe.”

“That’s sweet, Kirin, but I’m afraid you’re the one in need of saving. Surely you know what tracks you.” She scanned his little camp, his makeshift fire, its flames now sputtering, and his pack. “He was here, not long ago, wasn’t he?” A sudden fire lit her voice, and the sputtering flames roared.

“Who?”

Vera turned on him, eyes venomous. “Don’t play with me, Kirin.” She snatched his shirt with surprising strength. The fire snapped

and popped and her eyes burned, reflecting its intensity. “Tell me,” she seethed, “he was here wasn’t he?”

Gray pushed away. “He was, but he’s gone now. Long gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she said breathless. “I shouldn’t have done that. I…” she looked up and pain roiled in her eyes. Such pain… he wanted suddenly to hold her. He settled for taking her arm and helping her to sit on a nearby rock. Still, he kept his distance. “You see,” she began, “He has taken much from me. From all of us, and though I know I cannot face him myself, I would give everything I have to see him pay for what he has done.”

“What has he done? Who is he?” Gray questioned.

“Kail,” she whispered. Gray’s mouth went dry. “So you know who he is?”

“Yes.”

“He has many names,” she said, eyeing the woods. “The blight-seeker, the cursed one, but of course most commonly… the wanderer, not to mention, the rightful bearer of Morrowil, the sword you now hold. Of course some say he lost his mind when a loved one died, or that his power grew too much to handle, or that the bloodshed of the Lieon took its toll. But the real truth is that the blade in your hand is the grand sword, an object of horrible power that tainted him. It is the reason he is now mad. That blade is the destroyer of men, and it will destroy you too.”

Gray looked down at the blade, torn between sheathing it and keeping it close at hand. “You still haven’t answered what you are doing here.”

“It’s a long story,” she said.

“I have time.”

She rose and circled him as she spoke. “Once I heard you’d left the Citadel and crossed Death’s Gate I couldn’t believe it. I was hurt, but I needed to know what happened. I talked to the guards at the gates and a few gave accounts of a man bearing your description,

and carrying a strange sword. That very night, as I was walking back to the Citadel, an attempt was made on my life. I survived, but the next day I found that the guards I'd talked to had been killed." She breathed a heavy sigh. Gray felt her breath at the nape of his neck. "Naturally, I knew I needed to find out more about that sword. Researching in the old libraries was purely forbidden, but I had to know. And that's when I found out it was Kail's. He killed all those who saw the blade. He needs it to fulfill the Return and destroy the world as he tried to do long ago." She paused, her face a breath away from his. "Don't you see? As long as you hold that blade, you won't be safe. I... I don't want to even imagine what he would do to the bearer of his sword. I knew he would hunt you down, and that's why I had to find you first."

Gray nodded slowly, it all made sense. My past... he thought, pulse racing. Vera slowly ran a finger down his arm towards his sword. His eyes focused on her hand. But one thing didn't make sense. "He already did find me. You said he would kill me as soon as he saw me. He didn't."

"I was going to ask that myself. How did you survive?"

"He warned me and then left. There was nothing more to it. Your story doesn't add up, Vera."

Vera sighed as if he were daft. "Is that so? Well, I guess all men need to be told where to put their feet on occasion in order to stop them from tripping over themselves. Answer me this, when he came to you, did he grab the sword?"

"Yes," said Gray. "But he gave it back."

"And when he grabbed it, did it cause him pain?"

"It did," he answered slower, curious.

"You see? He cannot simply kill you and take the sword."

"What do you mean?"

"It is in the prophecy, Kirin," she said. "Once the sword chooses a new bearer, the old owner must wait for the sword to ascend, but

once the sword turns, any can bind their soul to its purpose. Until that time, all but the true bearer will be pained by its touch," she explained. "In this phase, Kail cannot wield it. Instead, he waits for you to turn the blade before he can grasp it once again."

Suddenly something rustled in the brush. The woods abruptly darkened. The fire sputtered dying in a rush.

"They're coming," she said.

"Who's coming?"

"Those who follow Kail, the ones I came to protect you from. This is not something you can face alone," she said. "There are so many..."

"The town of Lakewood is not far," he said, "You should run now."

"You don't understand!"

"I'm not leaving you," he answered, when a sliver of darkness crept along the blade.

Master the sword, the words echoed in his head.

"Damn you and your stubborn pride," she cursed. "You haven't changed at all. So be it. Together, then." Strange pink light filled her palms. She tilted back her head, as if letting the power consume her. Faint veins in her neck glowed green. She stood beside him, facing the woods. "Last chance," she offered.

"Like I said, I'm not going anywhere." Gray watched as a darkness slunk along the ground, nearing until it was almost upon them. It reached for his boot. He stepped back quickly, but before he could, the darkness shrieked. He looked to his sword in surprise. The darkness is afraid of the blade's light, he realized. The blade roared, as if in response, its silver luminescence pushing back the darkness. He looked at Vera. The darkness avoided her all together.

It moved away, crawling up the trees, and it turned the leaves to black ash with a sizzling hiss. Gray swallowed hard. Vera's eyes didn't even flicker.

Vergs stepped out of the woods, and saeroks stalked behind. Just like the stories, they were covered in sparse fur and loped on all fours. They rose onto two legs, standing twice as tall as him. Thick-hided monstrous vergs, their steps rattling the earth, lurched out of the woods, a steady stream. They were completely surrounded. Abruptly, the vergs laughed. Saeroks echoed their nightmarish brethren, and the sound blended together in a blood-chilling chorus. Gray saw an opening, and charged with a cry.

Words flared before his mind and power filled his limbs. Quenching the Fire.

He cut into a saerok, severing claws as it attempted to parry his mighty blow. The blade cut with liquid ease. The saerok cried out, and its jaws flared wide. A roar like fired sounded, and a seething ball of black hurtled over his shoulder. It smashed into the creature before him, tearing it apart.

Gray saw Vera in the corner of his vision as a verg swiped at him. Fear fueled his limbs, and he rolled between its legs hacking left and right. It howled in pain. A saerok appeared before him, lashing out. Its swipe caught his shoulder and he rolled aside. Gray lost himself in the movements. A voice whispered. Trimming the Stalks, meets Wind Dances in the Reeds, flowing into Tempest Fury. Vera fought by his side. Beasts fell before her fiery black bolts, even quicker than his sword. What was more, he could swear in his flickering glances that the beasts looked shocked as she cut them down—it seemed the only reason they weren't dead. Gray dove beneath a strike when a cry sounded beside him.

Vera.

She clutched her chest. The menacing dark power that surrounded her quickly dimmed. Saeroks and vergs descended upon her.

He shouted and ran towards her.

"No!" she cried, thrusting out a hand, "Run, Gray! Run you fool!"

The words sounded all too familiar. Gray stopped, paralyzed by the words. No! Not again! He dashed towards Vera, heedless of the

corpses that littered the ground.

A saerok jumped before him, blocking his way, and he cut, but the beast grabbed for his sword in one powerful hand. Gray pulled with all his might, slicing its hand. The creature cried out, but two more saeroks joined it, falling in at its side. There are too many. It was the voice of a warrior who knew an unwinnable battle.

“Run,” it said mockingly as blood poured from its wound. Other saeroks and vergs were still coming out of the woods. They approached in a slow, ominous death-stalk. Gray cursed loudly, his mind filled with rage.

Finally he turned, and tore through the woods. He heard the breath of saeroks on his heels and the crash of brush behind him, and he ran faster. He dared not look back as he jumped over root and vine, tearing heedlessly through the shrouded forest.

At last, he glimpsed a light like a beacon through the trees.

Lakewood.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A FESTIVAL

The light of the town was lurid in Gray's vision as he ran, nearing the stone gate. Exhausted, he fell to his knees. "Someone help!" he bellowed and pounded on the gate.

He glanced over his shoulder, flinching, expecting to see beasts hurtling out of the night and across the stretch of earth—but there was nothing. The creatures that had been scraping on his heels were nowhere to be seen. He paused, as his breath came quick and hard. Suddenly, he heard sounds and lights danced, bobbing up and down upon the rampart. In the center of the door, a slot scraped open. A helmeted eye peered out. "Quick, I need help! Someone's hurt!" The slot slammed shut. His fists clenched and he shouted, "What's wrong with you? Why will you not help?"

Suddenly from behind, he heard the clop of hooves on the soft dirt. He twisted, half expecting to see the monsters. Instead, he saw an orange light in the darkness. He hid behind a nearby rock as the light approached, resolving itself into a cart. A skinny man, wearing the simple garb of a merchant sat in the driver's seat. Who else would attempt to enter at this time of night? Gray wondered. The cart rolled closer and he saw it was full of hay. The merchant stopped before the door. The slot slid open again.

"Who is it?" a voice called.

"It's me, open the door!" the merchant ordered.

"Show me the sign!"

The merchant grumbled and pulled back his sleeve, exposing his forearm, showing the guard something Gray couldn't see. This was his chance. Gray slid from his hiding place. He dashed towards the cart, staying low and quiet. The merchant's back was still turned and he dove into the mountain of hay, wriggling and burying

himself deep. There was a scraping sound. The gate slid open. Through the hay and the wooden slats of the cart, he saw a soldier in leather and mail approach.

“Did you see a young man?” the guard questioned gruffly.

“Man? I saw no one,” the merchant replied. “What are you talking about?” Gray was right below the merchant’s seat and could hear the man’s wheezing breaths. Moist straw pricked his flesh all over, and sweat trickled down his brow as he waited for the two to speak again. What were they doing?

“I suppose I was mistaken,” the guard said at last. “You see and hear strange things at this hour. The darkness plays tricks on you. What’s your name, brother?”

“You may call me, Erebos,” said the merchant.

“Was the road difficult?” the guard asked.

Erebos snorted. “I did not travel from the lands to the east, moving day and night to exchange pleasantries.”

“Whatever you say,” said the guard. “So it is time then?”

“Soon enough. We must prepare for their arrival. Are any suspicious?”

“None yet. However, there is a new presence in town giving orders.”

“Who is it?” Erebos asked.
“I’m not sure. They arrived just recently. I heard it is a woman. The watch has been doubled already. It is only a matter of time until someone suspects. I’m not sure if I can wait any longer.”

“Steel your nerves,” the merchant commanded under his breath, “The reward is well worth the wait.” A straw pricked Gray’s ear, and another tickled his nose. The desire to itch made his skin crawl, and he struggled for a breath in the stale air.

“What’s in the cart?” the guard asked abruptly, moving closer, so

close Gray smelled the guard's breath that stank of ale. If he wanted, he could reach out and grab the man's sword from his sheath. The guard pushed at the straw with his gloved hand.

"No use looking back there, just hay," Erebos said. "I stole the cart on my way here, and killed the man who owned it. I saw no use emptying it. It proved useful and aroused less suspicion. Now if you don't mind, the last thing I want is to be sitting in the cold and jabbering with you. Direct me to the nearest hovel and I'll be on my way."

"The Golden Horn is our best inn," said the guard, "Talk to Mishif. He knows everyone and everything that goes on within Lakewood. He'll set you up. Till next I see you, brother."

Erebos grumbled something in reply, and Gray heard the horse nicker as the merchant flicked his reins. The cart rumbled through the gate, and he glimpsed the tall stone walls, and the cobblestone road.

As soon as he entered the town, and got a fair distance from the gates, he slipped out the back of the cart, and rolled to the street. He ducked into the shadows of a nearby roof and caught his breath, brushing hay from his clothes.

Beyond he heard sounds of laughter and cheer. He saw colorful displays of tents. Delicious smells hit his nose and made him groan. A festival? It's as good a place as any to look for Mura. He headed towards the lights as a round of explosions lit up the night sky.

Chapter Twenty-Three

LAKEWOOD

Fireworks exploded in the night sky.

“Come join us, Darius!” a group of girls called in unison.

With a smile and a bow, Darius declined, for something more interesting caught his

attention. A laugh rose above the others. Cari stood behind the counter of a nearby apple stand.

Darius dodged through the crowd, and with a nimble twist ended up right in front of the stand. He rested an elbow on the counter and added a wink.

“Happy harvest, Darius,” she said shyly, but her light blue eyes were not shy.

“Evening, Cari.” She looked sweet, but somehow different. Her heart-shaped face was framed by dark wavy hair. He liked how she wore it down and loose, unlike the others girls who pulled their hair back. He realized in that moment that she was no longer a girl.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

Darius looked back. He eyed her until she blushed, then he laughed and she did the same. Appearing out of nowhere, a batch of girls swarmed in from all sides. They tugged at Cari, giggling and coaxing her to join them.

Darius turned on his most charming smile. “Evening ladies.”

“Darius,” Vivian said as she arched an eyebrow. “What sort of trouble are you causing tonight? Come, Cari,” she said, and before he knew it they had linked arms and were tugging her away.

He sighed, snatched an apple off the counter, and tossed a copper onto the empty stand. Turning, he moved into the crowd when he was hit hard. Knocked from his feet, he landed in the dirt.

Dazed, he shook his head as a hand extended before his face. He looked up into the face of a young man roughly his own age. His disheveled dark hair matched his brows, and his angular face was smudged with a thin layer of dirt and a weeks' worth of unshaven stubble—not much more than I can grow, Darius conceded in the back of his mind.

The man's deep-set, green eyes were the only clear feature. "Are you all right?"

Darius took the hand and stood. With his other hand, he deftly checked to make sure his bag of coins was still there. Cutpurses were rare in Lakewood, but they were not unknown.

"Quite all right," Darius replied, brushing himself off and taking another sidelong look at the young man. "You look a bit travel worn," he said, and thought it an understatement. He bowed. "Darius is my name. What's yours?"

"What does that matter?"

Darius shrugged. "I just want to know, that's all. Not many visitors to Lakewood. Don't get your hackles up."

The stranger looked embarrassed. "Gray," he said, shaking his hand.

"Good," said Darius, "Now that we have that settled, what brings you to town?"

"A friend. I'm looking for him." Gray ran a hand through his hair, as if nervous.

"Is he a newcomer?"

"Yes, I was told to talk with a man named Mishif? Can you direct me?"

"Bah," said Darius. "You don't need to talk to Mishif." He put a

hand on his shoulder, drawing him in. He noticed Gray's tattered gray cloak and its insignia of two crossed swords. "First off, he'll talk your ear off, and go on about regulations so long that you'll realize you've spent a month standing in the same spot, and your friend has off and left town. And second, because I know everyone in Lakewood, including the newcomers."

Gray looked relieved. "That's excellent! So then, you know a man named Mura?"

"Hm," Darius paused, finger to his lips. "Nope."

"But you just said..."

"I never said I was good with names," Darius replied, raising his hands defensively. "But if you give me a description, I'd be glad to oblige."

Gray narrowed his gaze. "All right, he's probably a hand shorter than you."

"Good start," said Darius nodding.

"...And he dresses in gray and black, and he will likely be worn from travel. He will be unshaven, and he wears his gray hair pulled back loosely in a knot."

"And he looks like he can chew leather and clean his teeth with sharp steel?" Gray's eyes brightened.

"Yes!" he said and then paused. "Well, I suppose that sounds like him."

"Don't know him," said Darius as he cuffed Gray's arm. "Just sounded like a good description." Gray looked as if he were ready to hit Darius in the jaw. He laughed, shaking Gray's shoulder to ease the tension. "Hey, come on, relax."

"I don't need to relax, I need to find this man," he said and turned away, once more looking over the heads of the crowd. "It's important."

“Hey you, stop!” A voice cut through and Darius looked up as a guard’s helmet bobbed over the heads of the crowd. The guard pressed his way through the throng of revelers, causing a commotion. He was heading straight for them.

Darius spoke quickly, watching the guard’s approach over Gray’s shoulder, “Sorry, my friend, but this is where we part. I wish you the best of luck in Lakewood and for the record, I meant no harm.”

“What are you talking about? Where are you going?”

The guard broke through the last set of men and women. Darius twisted, his fingers dangling at his side anxiously. He looked for a way out but saw none. The guard was tall and would surely see his departure. Suddenly, there was a scuffle and a man tripped, falling into the guard’s path and slowing his advance.

Now’s my chance. He gave Gray’s shoulder a parting grasp, and then slipped away, ducking through a gap in the crowds. Thanking Lokai for saving him yet again, he hurried away. But curious, he paused before he had gone too far, and looked back.

The guard grabbed Gray by the arm, and pointed angrily to his sword. Gray fought but the guard hauled him away. What? He wasn’t after me, he was after him.

Who was his new friend?

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Courtyard

The guard pulled Gray to a halt.

They were on the keep upon the hill, and had taken a circuitous route through various courtyards and hallways to get here. Ahead, a series of stairs led to a training yard open to the bright night sky. It was filled with men and women in rings. In one, a man instructed while others sparred. On the far side of the yard, men faced stacks of hay with bow and arrow. Despite the time of night, the grounds were alive with energy, and shouts filled the air. A full moon and orange paper-lanterns lit the scene.

“She’s waiting for you, over there,” said the guard, pointing.

“Are you going to give me my sword back?” He eyed Morrowil, which the guard held in one meaty fist. The fool had no idea what he held.

“No. Swords are forbidden in Lakewood. It will be kept in the Tower until you leave our walls. Besides, you’ll have no need for it. Lakewood is a safe town. We make sure troublemakers like you don’t stay long.”

“We’ll see about that,” Gray said. He turned as a female’s voice, full of power and grace, cut through the din of battle—. Now loose from the guard’s grip, Gray debated running. But his curiosity was too great, and he followed the voice.

As he moved through the combatants, he noticed the skill of two men who clashed in the center of a circle. Too wide a stance, he remarked as the smaller of the two retreated under a flurry of blows. Gray saw the small man’s face break out in sweat, furiously parrying. The tall man pressed the clear advantage, ready to win.

The small man will win, a voice said. He squinted, curious where

the thought came from, but it was clear it was his own voice. At last the small man cried out, smoothly side stepping a thrust from the tall man and smashing down with his sword. He stopped a sliver away from the tall man's neck. His opponent wore a look of disbelief as a round of applause erupted from the circle. Gray smiled and continued, maneuvering his way through the combatants until he came to the stand of willowy yen trees from where the voice carried.

Guards conversed over long tables with scrolls spread across their surface, while couriers in black and red livery rushed to and fro. To their right, more men and women stood in congregation. They were dressed in fine silks of rich purples and blues.

Gray heard the woman's voice again.

"You will not see them because they do not want you to see them. Not until it is too late. Only then will they strike.

"This meeting was called for one purpose only—to discuss the future of this land, and the lives of your people. Why we are here is to piece together the truth from the rumors and decide on the path for survival." A round of unruly voices sounded from her last word. Her voice overrode it. Gray ducked and dodged to get closer, "It is now no longer a matter of fighting and winning, you must get that through your heads this instant, or leave and fall to the coming darkness. To understand this you must understand the enemy. They are from an age where magic reigned supreme, a time with kingdoms and armies dwarfing everything you know. Even then, as you have heard from your stories, the great armies failed against them. They wield powers that you cannot begin to fathom. We have only one option, we must find safety. We must go north."

"Run? To where?" voices broke out.

"No! We must fight!"

"You speak only of rumors!"

The woman paused, as the quarreling of voices continued. Turning slightly, her eyes

locked with Gray, and he froze. She said something he couldn't hear, and the others turned to one another, conversing heatedly as she left the circle. She approached, and Gray held his ground. She wore white silk from head to toe with a scarlet red cloak upon her shoulders—the cowl of which was pulled far forward. A tall, broad-shouldered man in green, cloaked and hooded as well, walked at her side. More like stalked, he corrected.

"So this is him," the tall man said as if it were a long awaited announcement. Beware this man, Gray's internal voice cautioned, eyeing the sword at the man's side. The woman watched him.

Gray's gaze shuffled between the two. Though he could not see their faces clearly from within their hoods, he felt their stares. They eyed him like a piece of steel before the forge. "Sorry, do I know you?" he asked.

As if waking from a spell, the woman laughed. "Forgive me," she said. "It is one thing to hear about you, and to know you exist, and another entirely to see you in person." She bowed. "My name is Karil, and this is Rydel," she said with a wave of a hand. "It is truly a pleasure to meet you. Mura has told me much about you."

He moved to grab her arm, but immediately thought better of it. "He's all right then?"

"Mura seems to think very highly of you. I am glad to see that his admiration is not one sided. And yes, he is alive and well," she answered, touching his hand kindly. Her touch was warm.

"Where is he? Can I see him?"

Karil smiled. "Of course. I only wanted to see you for myself first, and I am glad I did." Again, the woman made reference as if she knew him, as if he were a character from a story. She must have seen his curiosity, for she continued. "I apologize. Sometimes I have heard that it is truly elvin to talk in riddles, and Mura has a fondness for it as well. I am not an inhabitant of Lakewood. My home is Eldas, the home of the elves."

Gray was breathless. He looked around to see if any others heard,

but it seemed talking with her had made a ring of space between them and the others. “An elf,” he whispered. “I thought they, I mean you, were only stories.”

“Come,” Karil motioned him to follow, and Gray obeyed. She led him around the corner of the palace to a bench beneath a yen tree, hidden from the crowds. Before he could speak, Karil withdrew her scarlet hood, unveiling her features. Silver eyes. They held a startling luminescence. The rest of her was equally captivating. She had high cheekbones, a narrow chin, and a slender neck. Pointed ears stuck out from her straight, long white-blond hair.

He turned his eyes, and apologized.

“Do not apologize,” she replied, “The sight of an elf is a strange thing to many, though in truth I am only half-elf, unlike Rydel.” She motioned to Rydel who stood respectfully behind her. He pulled back his hood. Rydel had an angular nose, a strong jaw and longer pointed ears. He noticed the more human side of Karil in contrast.

“I was not surprised because you are an elf,” he said at last, then amended, “Well,

not entirely. I just never expected elves to be so beautiful.” Karil’s eyes fanned wide, and he could tell he caught her off guard. “Sorry,” he said, “I realize how that sounded.”

“Don’t be. I was pleasantly surprised, that’s all. And I wasn’t sure if the comment was for Rydel either,” she teased.

He laughed and glanced to Rydel. The elf said nothing. He could teach a rock how to show less emotion. “Why did you bring me here?”

“To see if the sight of an elf would trigger memories of your past, but it seems it does not.”

“So Mura told you of that as well?”

“He did. What is more, no one besides you and Mura know that I am half-elf,” she said, “People of this land are accustomed only to their stories. If any of those stories actually became true, I’m afraid

of how they would react."

"You think if the people of this town saw an elf they would be... what, afraid? Don't you think they are wiser than that?" He wondered if he was overstepping his boundaries.

Karil did not seem provoked. "Fear and ignorance is a powerful thing, Gray, and something to be cautious of, but you are right—I simply worry that they would not understand, and they do not need another thing to cope with at this moment. Daerval is in enough turmoil as it stands."

Gray nodded. "I don't mean to be rude, but if you're done with me..."

Karil held a smile in her silver eyes. "You would like to see Mura," she stated, lifting her hood and hiding her features once more.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"Ah, but you must be famished from your long journey. Are you hungry?"

Gray realized as his stomach growled, that he was starving. "Starving, now that you

mention it."

"Then I'd venture my way to the Great Hall." She pointed up the hill. "That would

be a good place to look, if I were you." Her silver eye winked within her hood. "And be at ease within these walls, Gray, I know your journey has been long and hard."

Bowing and thanking them both—even the quiet statue-like elf—Gray took his leave. Moving through the dark courtyard, his stomach churned, and fear and elation collided with one another after the many long days. He hadn't stopped worrying about the hermit, and to know he was alive and well and within reach made him overjoyed.

More people walked the paths of the keep, now lit with orange lanterns. Gray found himself searching their faces, looking for Mura. Impatiently, he picked up his pace, racing through the courtyard and heading towards the Great Hall.

Chapter Twenty-Five

A VISION OF DEATH

Vera knelt before the fire. She warmed her hands on the flames, but the cold was bone-deep. She couldn't stop her body from shaking. She looked over her shoulder.

They sat in a small room. It was bare, save for a wood chair whose legs and back she had already used for kindling. An entry at the far side of the room showed a black night. She loathed the night, for it meant coldness and hunger. Somehow in the day, she could distract herself from the pain of her gnawing gut.

Within arm's reach, Kirin lay fast asleep. He was curled, arms wrapped around his small body, shivering in his sleep. Her heart panged. Why did he have to be so quiet?

So unassuming in his pain and suffering? With every waking moment Vera felt her anger and bitterness grow. But Kirin never said a word. Instead, he merely pushed forward. Twice he had nearly been caught for stealing a loaf of bread for the two; and the price for theft in Farbs was steep—the loss of a hand or even death was the toll for quick fingers. And still, he would smile and give her the bigger half. She envied his perseverance.

Quietly, she removed her cloak, wrapping it around his tiny, gaunt frame when a figure entered, head scraping the ceiling. Immediately, her heart darkened. She pressed herself against the wall. "Who are you?" she asked.

It spoke and the walls quaked, "A nightmare." The voice was like thunder. She couldn't see its face within its hood, but she knew it was smiling. It loomed, its frame nearly filling the room with malevolence.

"Leave us alone! If you're looking for food or money, we don't have any..."

“Enough,” it said coldly, cutting her off. “This is a dream. Break this foolish illusion, Vera, or I will break it for you.”

As if waking, she looked around. Instead of rags, she wore her midnight black dress with its long slit at the top of her thigh. Instead of the cloak around Kirin, it was the thick cape she had fashioned from the hide of a disobedient verg. She shook her head, and rose to her feet. She eyed the man before her, and suddenly it all made sense. He’d found her. A dark dread, a thousand times more terrifying than before seeped beneath her flesh. She breathed and it misted in the suddenly frozen air.

“Kneel,” he breathed.

Without hesitation, she pressed her face to the hard clay ground. “Master...”

“A touching image,” he said, head turning to take in the small room, “You disappoint me.”

“Master, I live only to serve... I—”

He interrupted her. “You still have feelings for him, don’t you?”

She looked up, catching his gaze. He meant Kirin. “He is nothing to me,” she seethed.

“Truly,” he replied, eyeing the cloak that warmed the boy.

“A dream and reality are far different things,” she retorted.

“Is that so? He tried to save your life that day, but still you are wish to finish him and retrieve Morrowil?”

Vera neared the sleeping Kirin. Grabbing the ruby-throated dagger from behind her back, she smoothly unsheathed the blade and drove it towards his chest with a cry. The boy gasped, eyes opening as blood spouted from his chest. Vera cut with ruthless precision. Two cuts. She severed the major veins and his eyes flickered, closing as the last of his breath fled. “Do not doubt me. Nothing matters but the blade. I will bathe in his blood before it is done.”

The figure sneered, but still she couldn't see his face. He waved his hand and the boy disappeared like smoke. "That is yet to be proven." Suddenly his fist clenched, muttering beneath his breath, and terror filled Vera.

Her hand tingled as if a flame was embedded just beneath the skin. "What are you doing?"

"You didn't think your betrayal would escape my eye, did you?"

"No! I simply tried to..."

"Your orders were simple. You were to follow the Kage." His form grew bigger, nearing, words rattling the room.

"I did as you commanded! You told me—"

"SILENCE!"

Vera trembled, feeling her mind bend as if unhinging before his presence. "I... What do you want of me, my lord?"

"I want you to obey. I saved you that day for a reason. It seems I was wrong to have done so. You've failed me." He flicked his hand and suddenly a fire burst upon her hand. She watched in horror as scarlet flames consumed her flesh, eating her fingers one at a time, burning her alive.

She screamed, "What is this?"

"I'm undoing what I did so long ago."

"No," she cried, "Without your spell, I will die!" The flame continued to burn, reaching her wrist, eating at her arm. Fire lit the walls, burning the small room and the dark man remained still. "Please, save me! I was simply trying to find the boy! The Kage are wrong! We must think ahead of him!"

The figure lifted a hand.

The flesh-eating flame stopped, but still the room's inferno burned until her face was drenched in sweat. She tried to think, tried to

form words in her frantic mind. “He... he will evade the Kage, he is smart and there are others on his side, helping him. At this rate, we will never get the blade.”

“Then what do you propose? How would you take the blade? Speak quickly.”

“We use the dark army to flush out the boy,” she said.

His head tilted, stalking forward like a hungry wolf. “Go on.”

A small smirk creased her face as she gripped her white-boned wrist in agony, “To catch a rat, you must first scare it from its nest. Burn its home to the ground, then the flame and smoke will push the rodent from its hovel towards waiting arms.”

He lifted his hand and the scarlet flames danced around her bone arm. “Speak plainly. My patience is already at its limit.”

“The boy is in Lakewood, use the Kage and the rest of your minions to siege the town and flush him out.”

“And if he escapes?”

She couldn’t help but grin wickedly, “Then I’ll be waiting and we shall spring the trap upon our little rat.” One way or the other, Kirin, you will be mine.

The looming black figure was silent, and then a dark laugh echoed off the walls and the flames danced. “A foolproof plan, it seems.”

She bowed her head lower. “I live only to serve, my lord.”

“No,” he said and dark power filled his voice, “you live only because I allow you to, and I will ensure that you continue to do so.”

Vera gasped as a chill entered her—it sunk beneath her flesh and gripped her bones.

“What are you doing?”

“Insurance,” he said and closed his eyes. Vera watched as a single thread of the element of flesh appeared, drawing from her skin. It was blindingly bright with power. Suddenly, like a spider’s web dissolving before a flame, it evaporated. The figure looked up. She felt her blood freeze. Dark-red peered from his cowl and into her soul, as if his eyes were globes of blood. “It is finished.”

Her skin glowed translucently. “What is this?” she asked, touching skin that felt soaked in oil.

“You have two weeks to kill the boy and obtain Morrowil.”

“And if I fail?” she asked.

“The potent threads I wove long ago to keep the darkness at bay are unraveling. If you fail, or your sentiments towards the boy are untrue, then the darkness of the blade will eat at you. The remnants of Morrowil’s magic will consume your flesh bit by bit until the death I spared you from takes you once again. And this time, there will be no returning from the grave.”

Abruptly, Vera had a flashing memory of a dark night.

The room was filled with broken furniture and dead bodies. Blood ran across the stone—it was her own. She eyed it in confusion as she rose to her feet, a strange spell coursing through her veins as she eyed the tall figure before her.

“Who are you?” she asked, looking up at the terrifying form—he was taller than any mere man. Instead of clothes, black flames wreathed his wide-frame. A demon... her mind whispered.

“You may address me as ‘my lord’. I have spared you from death, Vera. But the price is your life. You will be my servant from now until I release you, if I so choose. If you fail me, however, you will regret your salvation from death, for I will show you a pain this world has never known.”

She pushed the memory aside, returning to the moment.

“And... when I succeed?” she said, choosing her words confidently despite her rising terror.

“If you obtain the blade, the spell will return and you will once again be spared from true death.”

Vera nodded, feigning confidence. Before she could respond, he spoke. This time his voice thundered in her skull, rattling her to her core and she closed her eyes, grabbing her head to keep it from splitting in two. “Find the boy, and take Morrowil, or die. Now go, but do not think I will be far. I am watching you always. And if you ever betray me again, this visit will seem a pleasant dream.”

When she opened her eyes, he was gone. The fire before and flames upon the wall died in a rush and suddenly the nightmare collapsed.

Her eyes snapped wide. Darkness enveloped her. Nearby, she felt Drefah’s presence. The huge wolf’s fur ruffled from a breeze. Otherwise, the night was quiet. Separated from her Niux’s camp, the snarls and grunts of sleeping vergs and saeroks were distant. There was a faint glow beneath her blanket and she lifted her covers.

Upon her arm was a deathly light. Her whole body stiffened as she raised her hand to stare at fingers no longer flesh, but bone. Abruptly, the light faded, seeping back into her skin, but she felt it —waiting in the shadows, slowing eating away at her until there was nothing left.

Soul-burning purpose and the desire to live filled her. She would warm herself in the blood of Gray, giving him the death he deserved in order to spare herself.

And in the end, she knew a final truth the dark figure did not name. Once I gain the blade and become its owner, I will no longer need the spell… the power of the blade will return me to my true form, and not even the gods themselves will defy me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE GREAT HALL

Gray reached the doors of the Great Hall. The sound and flow of commotion guided him towards the chambers like a fish in a stream.

The doors burst open, and a torrent of cheer flowed over him. A group of drunken guards stumbled out. He sidestepped them as he took in the spectacle of the hall. Huge, ornate pillars ran down the center and flanked long rows of oak tables. Each table was filled with guards and commoners, eating and drinking while servants hustled.

Gray scanned for Mura as he moved through the tables. The hall was raucous. The clink of plate and fork, and the chiming of frothy mugs set his nerves on edge, and he jumped at a round of sharp laughter. Nearby, a group of men and women danced to the tune of a flute and drum. The noise and bright lights jarred him. He looked around feeling eyes on him.

Abruptly, he heard a scream, and he twisted towards it. A bearded man with a greasy smile grabbed a passing waitress. Several men including two nearby guards watched the flailing woman, jostling one another in amusement. Gray moved to help the woman, and stumbled over a chair, causing a string of curses from those nearby —but before he was halfway to her, the brown-haired waitress laughed and batted her aggressor away while fluttering her lashes. The men he had bumped into watched him as if he were mad. Pulling up his cloak, he wove his way to the corner of the hall looking for a seat to calm his frayed nerves. What's going on? He thought, his heart thumping. What is this feeling?

In the corner, beneath a flickering torch, he found an empty table where the din of the hall was reduced to a low hum. He took a deep breath. I'm jumping at every little thing. Something tingled beneath his shirt, and as he reached for the pendant a voice spoke.

“Is this seat taken?”

“No,” he said retracting his hand and looking up. There stood Mura with a wry smile. Gray leapt from the bench and embraced the hermit, lifting him from the ground. The man grumbled good-naturedly, but Gray paid no heed. Mura felt real and solid.

“I see you’ve not lost your strength,” Mura said, rubbing his ribs with a laugh.

“Where’ve you been?” He exclaimed. The man wore a tan shirt and brown pants, and in place of his usually tattered shirt, he wore a snug black tunic. A few scratches marred his cheek and forehead, but he looked nearly unscathed.

“I’ve been here. When you caused your little raucous over there I spotted you. Is everything all right, lad? You look as if something is nipping at your heels.”

“I’m all right now,” he said and motioned the man to sit. So caught up in the moment he failed to notice that the hermit had placed a steaming dish upon the table. It was filled with cubes of lamb, buttery rice, and two thick slabs of bread. The smell of spices rose from the plate hitting Gray’s nose, and his stomach twisted in knots. “I’ve never smelled anything so good.”

Mura chuckled. “Fool boy, I figured you hadn’t eaten since I last saw you.”

“You’re not too far off.”

“Well dig in!” He exclaimed pushing the plate towards him. “I’ve had my fill, several times over,” he said with a wink, and when he saw the look on Gray’s face, he added, “I’m not going anywhere. Eat and then we’ll talk,” he insisted, pushing the plate closer.

Gray was only too happy to oblige, and as he finished the last savory bite, he looked up. “Is there more?”

Mura laughed, and then smoothly caught the attention of a waitress, signaling for another plate. “Well, I’m glad you haven’t lost your appetite.”

When Gray had his fill, he pushed the plate away. “What happened, Mura?”

“Back in the woods, or after?”

“Both. I want to know all of what happened until now.”

Mura nodded. “Then I’ll need a drink,” he said, and again smoothly snagged the eye of a barmaid and ordered two pints. She returned carrying two frothing mugs. Preparing his long-stemmed pipe, Mura spoke, “After I watched you fall over that cliff’s edge, I feared you were dead, but I never let myself believe it for a moment.”

Gray took a long draught, wiping foam from his upper lip. “And I prayed for you. But how did you survive?”

“By tooth and nail,” Mura answered. “A verg is a difficult thing to kill. A Nameless, however, is another thing entirely.”

Gray breathed through his teeth. “You killed a Nameless?” Nameless were fabled beings, rarely mentioned in the stories. They were more evil than a hundred vergs.

Mura tampered down the pipe’s contents, and took a long draw. As he exhaled, smoke billowed. “I killed the verg, but not the Nameless. I was lucky enough to escape its dark blade with my life. A Nameless is no mere creature of the Wasteland. It is far worse. In truth, I had heard only stories, and did not believe they existed until that day in the woods.”

“What are they?” Gray asked, leaning forward.

A round of sharp laughter went up at a table of gamblers. Mura continued when they quieted. “They are dark beings from another age. Some say they aren’t even living, and perhaps never were. They shift from shadow to shadow like a dark breeze, and can mist from thin air. Most legends say they can’t be killed. From older elvin stories, they are said to be once-Reavers—those who wield magic beyond the gates. During the great war, dark Reavers twisted their own form and a new enemy was born… the nameless.”

There was another bout of laughter, and a stream of curses erupted

from the nearby table. Gray shook himself, pushing away his drink.

“Now it is my turn,” the hermit said as he leaned closer. The torch on the wall behind them flickered, casting Mura in a ruddy orange light. “What happened to you my boy? How did you get away?”

At Mura’s words, Gray flinched, remembering the verg, the wolf’s bite, and what came after. “I fell.”

“...from the cliff?” Mura whispered, incredulous.

“Somehow I survived. I still don’t exactly know how.” Gray continued, “When I came to, I remembered what you said and I followed the Silvias River.” He paused as a barmaid passed their table, tucking her long blonde hair behind her ear. It reminded Gray of Karil. “By the way, how do you know Karil?”

The hermit took a drink from his pint. “You mean, how do I know an elf? But I suppose both are good questions. Finish your story, and I shall tell you mine.”

“There’s not much left to say,” he said with a shrug. “I made my way through the forest, and...”

“What is it?” Mura questioned.

“I met a woman on the border of the woods and we were attacked.”

“Who was she?” Mura asked.

“I’m wondering that myself,” he said. “Her name was Vera and she came from across the gates. She said she knew me, but I didn’t trust her. Then again, she saved me.”

“From across the gates? Interesting,” Mura said as he refilled his pipe. “

There’s one more thing,” he said. “I saw Kail.”

The hermit choked, coughing smoke. “You what? He’s alive?”

“I’d say so,” Gray said, fingering the cut the Ronin gave him upon

his cheek.

“So it’s true… What in the seven hells happened?”

Gray tried to remember Kail’s words. “He warned me… Something about the sword, and at the same time, he was pained by its touch. Then he left in a rush.”

“Just like that?” Mura whispered, “He didn’t try to kill you?”

Gray shook his head, still deeply confused by it all.

Smoke billowed as Mura exhaled in disbelief, “A Ronin come to life… I fear I will not believe it truly until I see it for myself.”

“I would not wish that upon you,” Gray said. “I fear it would be the last thing you see.”

“You might be right. Did the man seem mad as the stories say?”

Again, he shook his head. “He seemed driven, as if by some dark purpose.”

Mura scrubbed the stubble upon his chin. “This raises many questions. I will tell Karil of this news. That you were attacked so close to Lakewood worries me greatly. Lakewood is short on men as it stands. Half of them are patrolling the streets and watching the wall, and in truth, many have been too scared to take up their duties. Karil has done her best to light the dark corners of the town, but we must still be wary. Which reminds me, do you still have the sword?”

“I had to leave it with the guards.”

Mura inhaled deeply on his pipe, and let the smoke puff out the corner of his mouth. “We must get it soon.”

Gray admitted, not having the blade at his side was odd. Somewhere along the way he had grown strangely attached to it, but Mura looked to be hiding something. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Let’s just say, it’s better for the sword to be in your hands.”

He leaned forward. “Mura, what aren’t you telling me?”

The hermit tapped his pipe, emptying its contents, and placed it back in his pocket.

“I suppose it’s time to tell you all I know,” he answered. “Three years ago, I was on the other side of the gates. I lived in Eldas, the great Kingdom and home to the elves. At that time, a prophecy was uttered, one that would change the course of history. It was the prophecy that was destined to be the hope against the Return.” He paused, his eyes distant as if remembering and he took a long draught of ale. Gray knew of the Return. It was what all people feared—it was the Ronin’s return from the dead to finish what they started and leave the world in ruins. “It feels like a lifetime ago, but I can still remember her voice as she spoke the words.”

“Whose?”

“My sister,” Mura replied, and then looked up with a smile. “She was the prophet. The one who named you.” Gray’s fingers curled, balling into fists as he listened. “Our meeting was not chance, Gray, but that does not make me any less glad for it. You are an integral part of the prophecy. Three years ago, I came to my sister upon her deathbed. She instructed me to go to the Lost Woods, to wait for the one prophesied. I left everything I knew, crossed the gates with the aid of the elves, and made a home in the forest. There I waited for you.”

As Gray listened, a memory filled his vision of a dark night. Rain soaked through his tattered tunic, and his wet cloak clung to his cold limbs. He looked down. A sword was gripped loosely in his hand. A flash of lightning lit the forest. He saw dried blood upon the blade. Thunder roiled, shaking the ground when he smelled smoke. Gripping the blade, he followed the scent, weaving through the shadowy trees. Orange light shone through the branches. It was the light of a fire seen through glazed windows. A hut. Safety at last.

He returned to the moment. It had seemed sheer luck that he had

stumbled upon Mura's hut. But now he knew it was more. It was all intended.

"Are you all right, lad?" Mura asked. He rested a hand upon his arm, displaying the same warmth he had shone him so long ago.

"It's a lot to take in, but it all makes sense. Why are you telling me now though? You knew I sought the answers to my past." He couldn't keep the frustration from seeping in. "Why have you held it from me all this time?"

Mura's face went distant. "If you only knew how many times I wished that I could. But the prophecy demanded that you not know. It required that you live your life until the day it demanded you. My sister insisted upon that in her dying words." The hermit took another long draught from his drink. "Though truthfully, I had my own reasons as well. I wanted you to become the person you are today, unhindered by the burden of your prophecy. That is to say, I wanted you to have a moral compass that was true—I couldn't do that if you thought it was for some alternate purpose, than just simply to be yourself."

Frustration and confusion rose inside him and he pounded the table. Others nearby looked over, their conversation slowing. Gray waited until they looked away, and spoke, "I just want to know who I am, or who I was."

"You were born within Farhaven, but beyond that, I cannot answer your past. I wish I could."

"But I don't want this—any of it. Why would the prophecy choose me?"

"I know not, but oftentimes, we do what we must, until our fate reveals itself."

Gray felt for the pendant beneath his shirt. "I never asked for this..." The metal bit into his palm, but he held it tighter. A man in red and black livery wove through the tables, making his way towards them.

“Yes?” Mura inquired as the man approached.

“Apologies for the intrusion, but the queen seeks you,” the messenger said in a low tone.

“Is it urgent?” Mura asked.

“There is trouble. I was told to find you without delay.”

The hermit gave a deep breath and he turned to Gray. “I must see to this, will you be all right?”

Despite the queasy feeling in his stomach, Gray nodded and they clasped forearms.

“I will see you soon, my boy, and we will talk more.” With that, the hermit rose and swiftly followed the messenger out of the Great Hall.

Alone now, Gray settled back into his chair. Everything Mura said still churned in his head. “Prophecy,” he whispered aloud, but it sounded more like a curse.

And at a nearby table, the commotion was picking up, as voices grew heated.

He felt violence in the air.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A ROGUE'S LUCK

Darius rolled a die across the ridge of his fingers, holding his breath, his other fist clenched beneath the table. At last, the seven dice on the round wood table stopped their roll.

Seven ones.

He let out a strangled gasp of surprise. “Seven,” he said. All the other men grumbled and threw their coin, sitting back into their chairs. All except one.

Across the table, old Bueler eyed him with one squinted eye. “Had I not known all your tricks, Darius, I’d think ya was cheatin’.”

“What can I say?” Darius shrugged. “When you’re lucky, you’re lucky.”

Bueler snorted, “Aye—the Ronin’s own dark luck.”

Darius was startled by the comparison. He hadn’t heard them mentioned by name since he was a boy. He laughed uncomfortably and looked around the table. The other men looked equally unnerved by the name. At that moment, a group of shapely women passed closely by, flirting with the gamblers. Thank Lokai. Best make use of this. Darius pushed back his chair.

“Hold on!” Bueler croaked loudly. Darius saw the coin-seeking women hadn’t fazed Bueler. Instead, the man’s dark eyes narrowed, looking like small, angry lumps of coal. “Not going to let a man have another chance at his money?”

The others turned. Darius froze, half-risen from his seat. He knew where his dagger lay. He could get to it in the blink of an eye, but he didn’t move his hand. He didn’t want to fight nine men, not for a foolish wager. He debated giving the coin back, but something in

Bueler's eyes suggested the man wasn't wholly interested in the loss of silver anymore.

"Settle down, Buel," said Farley in his rumbling voice. He was Lakewood's blacksmith, and his brawny arms attested to that, as they barely fit inside his tunic. "No use getting worked up. It's just a game. And if you start a fight at the festival, the council will have your head on a pike." Bueler didn't seem to care. He stared at Darius with growing rage. He wasn't sure about the others, but Bueler's mind seemed more for blood than coin. The man was different tonight, a darker glimmer in his eyes. And while Bueler surely couldn't fight, the fool could work the others into a lather. Once in his life, Darius had seen a mob form, and a man had died as a result. It was a terrifying thing what the irrational power of rage and numbers did to a man. It was time to work his charm, before things got any worse.

"My apologies, gentlemen, while I would love to stay and chat, it is just far too glorious a night to waste simply tossing dice, even with such fine company." He bowed deeply, gesturing with his one hand, and with his other slid a portion of his earnings into his coin purse, leaving most of the heavy coins on the table—more than enough. Darius gestured to the coin. "A token of my appreciation. Until next time..." He turned, hiding a smirk. That should work, now to—

"Oh, you're not going anywhere," Bueler called. "Not this time."

Darius heard the scrape of wood as the other men slid back their chairs. He cursed inwardly.

"Turn and face us, you scoundrel!"

Slowly, he turned, and saw the speaker. It was Bueler's lackey, Ruben. Ruben was big, and while not as big as Farley he was still twice the width and a good hand taller than Darius. Moreover, the man's face reflected his many fights and foul temper. A scar ran across his missing left eye and down his mouth, leaving it in a perpetual sneer.

Don't look the bull in the eye. It'll only anger it. He turned his gaze down and flashed his most disarming smile. "Look, this is clearly a

misunderstanding. If you want another game, all you had to do is ask... I'm ready to lose my coin. That is, if you're man enough to take it. Now sit, sit," he ushered, "The next round is on me." He looked around for a barmaid, but as the tension grew, a clear gap was dividing between them and the others in the hall. Dice! Where are they when you need them?

"No more games," said another.

Darius tried to slow his beating heart. "Surely you're not going to start a fight in the Great Hall itself? A man of your intelligence, Bueler, would see the folly—"

"Shut up!" Bueler said, sliding his chair back, "Enough talking! Even your silver tongue won't save you now."

"You're mine first, rogue," Ruben voiced as he kicked a nearby cask, knocking it out of the way and causing a cascade of stacked barrels.

"You! Don't move a muscle!" A voice shouted from behind.

Ruben paused in his tracks and Darius twisted to see a young man striding towards him. Gray, he remembered. Gray shoved aside a stool, stomping towards him, his face a thunderhead. Darius backpedaled closer to Ruben. He was caught between a hammer and an anvil.

Gray grabbed him by the scruff and yanked him up. "You! You left me!"

Darius grabbed Gray's hands, trying to pry them off, but he had as much chance as prying a nail from hard oak. "You're angry, I can see that, but you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," Gray replied with a crazed light in his eyes.

"And just who are you?" said Bueler, squinting one eye at Gray.

"Back off, old man," Gray snapped.

Bueler recoiled, eyes widening.

“What did you just say?” Ruben sneered, stepping forward.

“Gray, you don’t understand,” Darius said in a fierce whisper, so only his friend could hear. “This man will hurt you and me. Just do as he says.”

Gray ignored him and looked to Ruben. “I said back off,” he repeated slowly as if the man were daft. “This is none of your affair. It’s between me and the rogue.”

Bueler gave a cruel-looking grin. “Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. This is the last time that swindler will cheat any of us of our hard-earned money. We’re taking back what’s ours out of his hide.”

“Whatever he owes you, he owes me more,” Gray growled. Ruben stepped forward. As he did, Gray released one hand, reached inside his coat pocket and shook his head.

Ruben froze, looking down his broken nose at Gray. “That better be more than a pig-sticker you’re hiding, because it’s going to take a lot more than that to stop me.”

Suddenly what Gray was doing dawned on him. He realized the grip on his collar was only so tight that it looked painful. Hiding a smile, he decided to play along. “I’d do as he says,” Darius told Bueler and the others, as if afraid for them.

“There’s seven of us, and only one of you—those aren’t good odds, friend,” Bueler stated, though he looked less certain now.

Gray laughed as if it were a trivial matter. “I’m a reasonable man, so I’ll compromise. You can have him after I’m done, if there’s anything left. But if you attack me now, I swear, I may not take all of you, but I’ll leave my mark deepest on you,” he said, his gaze resting on Bueler.

There was a long pause as men fingered their concealed blades. Ruben stepped forward, and Bueler put a hand to the man’s chest, “Wait,” he ordered. The big man stopped. Bueler eyed the hand in Gray’s coat. “As long as he gets what’s coming to him,” he said with

a twist of his upper lip.

“Oh, you can be sure of that,” Gray said and turned, throwing Darius ahead of him.

They rounded the corner into a hallway just out of sight of the Great Hall, and Darius breathed a sigh. He laughed softly, punching Gray good-naturedly in the arm. “Dice, nice going! Where’d you learn that trick?” He looked around. The hallway, lit with several torches in iron sconces, was empty of people.

“Who says it was a trick?” Gray asked, raising a brow.

Darius swallowed uncertainly. Gray’s stern features broke and he laughed, jabbing the rogue in the ribs with an elbow. Darius chuckled as well, but this time wondering if his friend was a tad crazed. Perhaps I was safer with Bueler and his big oaf. “Well, thanks either way,” Darius said. “And I’m sorry about leaving you before. I thought they were after me. Imagine my surprise when the guard snagged you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gray said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Good, glad that’s settled. What happened to you? It doesn’t look like they roughed you up too much.”

“No, I’m fine. I was taken to see someone, and a good thing too, they led me to the man I was looking for,” Gray replied.

“So you found your friend?” Darius asked when he felt a sudden sharp pain on his ear. He wailed, twisting to face his assailant. Blue eyes met his. He blinked in surprise, quickly taking in the pretty face. She had fair skin with a petite nose and a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge. Her looks were nearly enough to dampen the pain. But he knew that face, and as a result, both his attraction and fear immediately fled. “Dice! Let go of my ear, Ayva! What are you doing?”

“No,” she fumed, “What are you doing? Thinking you can get away from me when you and your pals shattered two of my best casks?”

“What are you talking about?” Gray asked.

Ayva, still with a firm hold on his ear, shot a finger around the corner and to the gambler's table where mead frothed from two big oak casks.

Darius cursed. "Look, Ayva, it wasn't my fault."

She snorted, yanking his ear higher and he yelped. "I don't believe that for a second," she said angrily, and looked to Gray, "And who are you?"

"Gray, meet Ayva. Ayva, Gray." Darius said through his teeth. "Now let me go!"

She nodded curtly in greeting. "Curious friend you have here, and what in the seven hells of Remwar are you two doing over here?"

"What does it look like?" Darius growled, "And keep your voice down, will ya?" "Hiding like a couple of bilge rats, is what it looks like," Ayva said.

Gray grabbed Ayva's arm and pulled her further around the corner, out of the open and away from the attention of the gamblers. Darius took the moment to shirk off her grip. He stepped back, rubbing his ear.

Ayva brushed off Gray's hand and glanced around the corner at the men who had settled back into their gambling. "What's going on? And you two better start speaking soon or I'll call those men over here—I won't hesitate," she warned.

"Those men accused Darius of cheating," Gray began.

"Bueler was acting like a downright fool!" Darius added.

The two shot him a fierce look. He fell silent, grumbling under his breath as Gray continued, "Before anything too bad happened, I pulled Darius away by reassuring them that he was mine first."

"I could have told her that," he snorted.

"Well, I see why you're hiding. And that's either pretty brave, or pretty foolish of you," Ayva said to Gray. "Bueler is an old fool like

Darius said, but a dangerous one at that, and he's the guard captain's uncle." She looked to Darius, raising a brow. "Accused of cheating? Why doesn't that surprise me?"

Darius scoffed. "I never cheat."

She waved it off with a hand. "Well, I don't want trouble any more than the next person, but as I see it, I'm still down two barrels, and it's at least partly your fault," she said with a hard eye in his direction.

"No it isn't!" he replied, "Like I said, I did nothing but..."

Gray clamped a hand over Darius' mouth. "What he means to say is we'll gladly replace the cost of the barrels, seeing as we were a part of the incident." He let his hand go and Darius wanted to protest. There's no reason why we should pay, but judging by the look in Gray's eyes, he didn't think he'd win this fight.

Ayva watched Darius, and he flashed a toothy grin in reply. "I couldn't have said it better myself," he lied.

She bit her lip. It was normally an attractive feature of hers, but right now it only annoyed him. "I suppose that will suffice" she said and she ticked off numbers on her fingers, "Let see, two barrels of Redsmead, and the weight of each was somewhere around ten stone... that's around ten silvers, give or take."

"How about take! Are you kidding?" He exclaimed.

Again, Gray shot him a withering look. Darius sighed and fell back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. Gray answered, "Sadly, Darius is right. I don't think either of us has anything near ten silvers."

"Maybe if we were kings," he mumbled to himself.

Ayva smoothed her white apron and smiled. "I figured as much. In that case, perhaps you two can help me get some new barrels from the inn since you destroyed those. These men are rowdy as is, but without drink? Soon the scuffle you prevented will seem a mere drop in the bucket."

“We’d be glad to help,” Gray said before Darius could object.

Darius looked between the two, arms crossed. “Oh, delighted,” he replied mockingly.

“Great! Than follow me, the Golden Horn is my father’s inn. It’s not far away.”

“Come on,” Gray said, grabbing his arm.

Grumbling, he followed and together they took to the side hallway, avoiding the gamblers and moving out of the Great Hall. He watched Gray pull up the hood of his cloak, and glance from right to left as if stalked by something much greater than the thugs in the hall. Watching him made even Darius jumpy, and he found himself looking deeper into the shadows as well.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

NAMELESS

With Ayva and Darius at Gray's side, they reached the inn by way of a back alley. He noticed the cobbled street was rutted with two well-worn tracks from the use of many carts. A merchant's lane, Gray suspected.

"You two stay here," Ayva ordered. "I'll be back with the horse and cart from the stable." The alley was narrow and the stone walls were lined with big oak barrels stacked high. A door on the far wall led into the inn. All of it was lit by the ripe moon.

Darius shuffled next to him, looking guilty with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Gray glanced up when he heard the clopping of hooves on stone. Ayva returned leading a horse and cart. With her instruction, he started to load the heavy casks. The rogue begrudgingly helped. Soon the cart sank under the weight.

"You two can handle the last two. I'll be back in a moment. I'm just going to explain the situation to my father," Ayva said and then bit her lip. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Gray said.

Ayva smiled and disappeared through the inn's door.

He turned to Darius, and then glanced to the last barrels. "Shall we?"

Darius grumbled under his breath. Together, they picked up the oak and iron-strapped barrel. Gray's muscles strained. "These are heavy," Darius groaned. "Why are we doing this again? I feel like I'm a part of some sort of charity."

Gray replied with a wry laugh. "I think someone had the brilliant

idea to get in a fight."

"Bah, I was merely the victim of circumstance."

"A victim of greed, more like," Gray mumbled beneath his breath.

Darius snorted, "Don't blame me for being clever at dice."

He shook his head, figuring that arguing with the rogue was futile.

"If someone sees me right now, there goes my hard earned reputation," Darius griped. "I've got an idea. If someone does see us and asks, we're stealing these, and not helping, agreed?"

"I'm not aiding your ill-famed reputation. I'm sure you're good enough at that on your own," he said as they picked up the last barrel. Darius slipped, nearly dropping the cask. "Watch it!" He said, struggling with the bulk of the weight. The rogue picked up his slack, but still his eyes were riveted to the roofs around them.

"Did you hear that?" Darius whispered.

"I didn't hear anything. What was it?"

"I'm not sure," the rogue said, shaking his head. "Must be my imagination."

"Too much ale?"

Darius chuckled, but something in his face still looked troubled.

They threw the last barrel in, closing the latch on the cart to prevent the load from rolling out, and as they did, something brushed his shoulder. His muscles tensed. In the corner of his eye he saw the look on Darius' face and he nodded. "I felt that," he whispered.

"Maybe it's just the wind," the rogue replied, backing up.

Gray reached for his blade and realized it wasn't there. "I don't think so," he said. From a hidden pocket, Darius extracted a broad arrowhead dagger. Together they watched the shifting shadows.

“Stay close,” Gray commanded.

Silence filled the alley.

“I think it’s gone,” Darius said with a breath of relief.

As he spoke, a black mist formed in the air on the nearby rooftop. Then, in a flash, the dark mist vanished. They twisted as it reappeared on the black-tiled roof to their right, then again to their left, too fast for the eye to follow.

“Dice, what in the seven hells is that thing?” Darius whispered.

He knew exactly what it was. A Nameless. He backed up against the stone wall of the alley, pulling the rogue with him. “Stay against the wall.” The thing continued to move, faster than light, flashing from the rooftops to the ground, circling them. Gray looked to the door. It wasn’t far, but something told him they wouldn’t get to it in time.

The carthorse whinnied in fear. In a flash of black, the sound was cut short. A gruesome noise rent the air, like claw or teeth ripping tender flesh. A gurgling scream from the horse cut through the night.

Darius trembled. “Gray...”

The sight was obscured by the cart, but he saw flashes of dark cloth, moving furiously, as if ravaging the animal.

“We must run.” He grabbed the rogue by his tunic, and lunged for the door. A rush of wind threw them against the wall, halting their advance. Gray twisted.

The Nameless perched upon the cart. Its cloak wavered in the night, black strips of cloth dancing in the wind. It was nearly invisible in the alley’s shadows. All save for its gaze. Stark white pupils held him, glowing inside its black shroud.

“What is that thing?” Darius whispered.

“A Nameless.” As he uttered its name, it leapt from the cart, landing

lightly upon the ground. It raised its arm. In its hand, mist formed taking the shape of a blade. The edge gleamed in the full moon. Frantically, he looked for a way out, but there was none. The door was too far. The only way out of the alley was around the Nameless. He leaned towards Darius and spoke, so low he could barely hear his own voice. “Be ready to move when I say.”

Darius’ eyes were wide, watching the creature. “What in the dice are you thinking?”

“There’s no time, just listen. The Nameless moves in the shadows. If I can fight it in the light, I should be safe.” At least long for enough for you to get help, he thought. “When I say so, stay in the light and don’t stop running.”

“Like hell I’m running while you stay and fight,” Darius snapped, and gripped his dagger tighter. “You just tell me what to do.”

He was glad for the rogue’s stubbornness.

“I am here for only you,” the Nameless said, pointing its blade at Gray. “But I sssuppose you can both die.” Its voice sounded like dry rasping leaves. A black tongue ran across sharp, bloodied teeth and it lifted its phantom blade.

“Not another step!” the rogue threatened, waving his shiv, a blade a third the size of the Nameless’ sword. “The next one will be your last,” he warned.

The Nameless gripped its dark blade tighter, knuckles cracking. “Do you even know what I am, human?”

“No,” Darius replied, “but I don’t need to know how to make a sword, to know it will cut. And if you take another step I’ll show you.”

“Fool,” it laughed, “no mortal blade can kill me.”

Gray realized the rogue was buying him time, and he searched for another way. Behind the Nameless he saw the cart, filled with its barrels. He eyed the latch that held the barrels in. If only he could reach it. Gray pulled with his mind, wishing he was close enough,

but even if he lunged, it was too far.

The Nameless drew closer. “Enough talk. Time to dieee.” In a blur it reappeared, striking at Darius. The rogue raised his dagger in a flash. The two blades collided. Immediately, Darius cried out in pain, gripping his hand and falling to the ground. Calmly, the Nameless turned to him. His jaw clenched, as he pressed further against the wall. He looked past the creature to the cart. He pulled with his mind, again, desperately reaching out. If he could only...

Suddenly, the latch clicked and the heavy barrels tumbled out. The Nameless twisted in surprise, but the weight and speed of the barrels were too much. They collided with the creature. Gray dove out of the way as the casks crashed into the wall and exploded. Wine sprayed through the air and soaked the ground a dark red. Gray looked up. The Nameless was nowhere to be seen. He ran to Darius, and the rogue groaned. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Darius stood shakily. “I feel as if I just ran headlong into a wall, but I’m all right.”

The Nameless misted in front of them. Before they could move, it backhanded Darius. The rogue hit the wall with a thud. At the same time, the creature swung his phantom blade at Gray. He rolled to the side, but the Nameless strode forth. He saw a thick strap of iron from a broken cask. He leapt for it, gripping it as the Nameless drew near. And with all his might, he swung at the approaching creature. The Nameless moved lightning fast and grabbed the iron. A smirk twisted its dark mask. Gray strained. He held the iron with every ounce of strength. The iron bent and steam hissed, rising from it as if the creature’s grip was acid. Gray’s hands burned, and he let go in a rush.

In the corner of his vision, he saw Darius move. He looked back, holding the creature’s attention. The rogue neared, brandishing his arrow shiv. Gray smiled. The Nameless’ eyes widened in curiosity, and Darius cried out as he stabbed the creature in the back.

The Nameless’ body convulsed and it disappeared in a rush.

“Did we get him?” the rogue asked as he sagged. As soon as Darius

spoke there was a sound like the hiss of steam. It filled the night, sounding from everywhere. Laughter, Gray realized.

“Arroganccce,” the Nameless hissed, echoing in the air. Gray twisted, searching for the origin of the voice.

Darius tensed at his side, pressing against the wall fearfully. “The blade went in, how in the seven hells is it not dead?”

“The arroganccce of your kind amuses me. Two thousand yearsss I have roamed this arid heap and still you dare to ssspit your pitiful ignoranccce at me.”

Gray moved to the center of the street. He stood in the light of the moon. Puddles of dark wine pooled around his feet, staining the stone like blood. “Come out!” he shouted.

“What are you doing?” Darius replied in a fierce whisper, beckoning him back. “We cannot fight this thing!”

“We can’t escape either,” he answered quietly. “When I say so, run and get help.” He looked back to the dark rooftops, still hearing the horrid laughter. “Show yourself!” Fear pounded in his veins.

Abruptly, the Nameless’ laughter cut short. In the silence, Gray heard blood pump in his ears. “Run!” he shouted and was glad to see the rogue sprint away. At least he’s safe.

A mist suddenly appeared before his face and a blade arced, jutting from the black vapor, crashing down. He dove, but he was too slow. Something sparked in his mind. It cut through the thick barrier and as it did a bright gold light burst. Gray saw forked lightning shoot forth. It connected, blowing the Nameless back, and the creature slammed against the wall. His mind churned. What had he done?

The Nameless lay in a heap against the wall, its black rags singed. Smoke rose from its still form. The lightning crackled and vanished. As random and sudden as it had appeared, it was now gone. The alley was dark again. Gray staggered, catching his breath as he looked at his hands. He looked up. Against the wall, the Nameless twitched. It’s still alive.

“Impossssible,” the creature seethed in anger as it slowly staggered to its feet, rising to its full height. Smoke still snaked from its body. “He sssaid you would not have your powersss yet.”

“Powers?” Gray questioned. As soon as he did, he regretted it, as the Nameless’ expression shifted from fear to one of confidence.

It laughed. “I sssee. Then, you do not know how to wield it. Not yet at leassst.”

The Nameless misted and Gray saw what was coming. He sprinted towards the door. The wind parted. He leapt to one side and the black blade slammed into the ground where he had been. Twisting, he watched the phantom sword lance toward him, this time too fast to evade. He closed his eyes, waiting for the blade to pierce when steel rang.

He opened his eyes to a tornado of movement, a blur of white and black. The two collided, jumping from roof to roof, materializing from thin air as their swords tangled. His eyes could barely keep up with the blur. Whatever it was, he knew someone or something was fighting the Nameless, and what’s more they were keeping pace.

Abruptly a blood-filled scream rent the air. Twenty paces away the black mist appeared. The Nameless. The creature stood, motionless. Then it crumbled to its knees and evaporated. As it disintegrated it hissed a single dying word. “Ronin...” And it was gone, as if it had never existed, leaving behind only its midnight black garb.

The white blur appeared in front of him, and the shroud fell, eddies flitting into oblivion. A man stood in its place. He held a sword loosely in one fist. Gray recognized the wanderer-like clothes. The man pulled back his hood and long gray hair fell, draping across his broad shoulders.

“Kail,” Gray whispered. The man looked up. He sucked in a breath as furious scarlet eyes took him in.

Kail’s eyes turned upward, and Gray followed them. From behind the clouds, a wine-red moon appeared. Kail turned, as if to leave, showing his cloak. An emblem of the twin black swords, crossed

and faded, was emblazoned upon his back.

“Wait,” he shouted, reaching out.

Without turning, Kail paused. They are coming. Be ready, said a voice on the winds, and then he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

INTO THE DARKNESS

Gray watched the rooftops. As he did, hands grabbed him, pulling him back beneath the inn's eaves. Turning, he saw it was Darius and he breathed a sigh.

"Sorry," the rogue said with a smirk, "I couldn't just leave you to get yourself killed." The black cloth of the Nameless fluttered from a gust of wind. "Dice, you killed him. How—"

He ushered Darius to silence and motioned to the rooftops.

"Looks like we've found you at last," said a voice in the dark.

Before he could react a second voice sounded from the rooftop to their left. "What are you doing, Maris? We were told to inform the others at once when we found him."

Gray followed the voices, his eyes straining in the dark, when the first voice replied, "Ah, you never let me have any fun, Baro. Besides..."

"We're already here," said a dark whisper and a man stepped out from the shadows.

He was slender with fitted gray breeches, and a long matching vest. Diamond-shaped vambraces were etched with the symbol of a sun. His heavy white cloak brushed the ground. In the moon's dim light, he saw that the man wore a white cloth mask that obscured all but his cold blue eyes. One thing was certain. This man was far more powerful than the Nameless. "Where did he go?" The man asked.

In the corner of his vision, Gray saw Darius' grip tighten on the dagger behind his back. Gray caught the rogue's eye and shook his head.

"I wouldn't," said another voice in the dark. A fourth voice? How

many are out there? Darius let out a sudden yelp as his dagger clattered to the wet ground. The rogue rubbed his hand as if burned, as he searched the darkness.

Gray stepped forth. “What do you want? Who are you looking for?”

“Das de rah hand da,” said the voice in the dark.

“We will not torture the innocent, Seth,” the masked figure said. “I will only ask this once. The man who saved you from the Nameless, what did he say? And do you know who he is?”

“Kail,” he answered. “And he said nothing.”

“Gray, what are you talking about?” Darius asked. “You saw Kail?” In a flash of red, a shadow appeared, and Darius crumpled to the wet stone. A man stood over him with a condescending look, his sword held in his loose grip.

Gray fell to his friend’s side. “What did you do that for?” With a cold sneer, the man turned. He wore a cloak with an insignia of a red flame. “Answer me!” Gray yelled, ready to lash out.

“Was that really needed, Seth?” said the voice upon the rooftops—the one that first spoke. “I’ve seen a cerabul drop from less.”

Seth shrugged. “He knew nothing. He was only going to cause more trouble.”

Gray’s fists clenched and a breeze swirled around him. He counted the voices again. Two on the rooftops, two on the ground. Four. He knew he couldn’t take that many, but he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

“Move aside, Seth,” said the white masked man. Though the words were barely a whisper, authority rang in his tone. Gray paused. Reluctantly, Seth stepped out of the way. The man knelt beside Gray, removing his fingerless gloves. “May I? I will not harm him.”

“How am I to trust you?” Anger seethed inside him.

“Unfortunately, you have little choice,” the man replied. “Please.”

Gray moved back slightly. The man closed his eyes and put a hand to the back of Darius' head. "Your friend will survive. He is merely unconscious," he said and rose to his feet, replacing his frayed gloves smoothly. "Let's try this again. What did Kail want from you?"

Gray shook his head, kneeling in the cold, wine-soaked street. "I told you the truth before," he said and rose to his feet, "For the life of me, I don't know what he wants. He is both savior and demon. At one moment he seems to want me dead and in the next he saves me. And truthfully, from where I'm standing? You seem more of a threat than Kail."

Omni's gaze bore into him. "You know more. Speak the whole truth, or I will listen to my friend in the shadows. I do not wish to harm innocents, but much is at stake."

Gray cursed inwardly. Somehow the man could read him like a book. He remembered what Vera had said about Kail and the sword. "He seems to be after the sword, and yet...when he touched it last, it caused him pain," Gray replied.

The man's ice-blue eyes widened. "So Kail does not have the sword?"

He was curious at the man's surprise. "No."

The masked man turned, speaking to the shadows. "You all can come out now." Shadows moved upon the rooftops, and figures dropped, landing silently in the street. Each rose to their full height. Lit by the moon, he took them in from left to right. The first had a shock of white hair, and wore an amused expression. Dual blades protruded above his shoulders. To his right, stood a man with a barrel chest roughly the size of a horse. Next to him, a man squatted on the balls of his feet, watching Gray with apathy, and beside him, stood another, who was covered head to toe in dark gray and tucked away in the shadows, lit partially by the moon's light. Standing behind the others were two men, one shorter with a curly beard and carrying a sword and shield. The other was taller with a hooked nose and a lantern jaw.

One, two... Seven men, he counted and suddenly, it all clicked.

Maris, the Trickster. Baro, the Bull. Hiron, the King-Slayer. Dared, the Shadow. Aundevoria̋, the Protector. Aurelious, the Confessor. He rattled their names and titles off in his head from left to right as he backed away. Every one of them appeared just like the stories—living legends in the flesh, all minus Kail.

The Ronin.

“You’re all supposed to be dead,” he whispered.

"I rather prefer being alive," said Maris.

The others ignored him, turning to the cloth-masked man. Omni, Gray now knew, adding his title to the rest. The Deceiver.

“What does it mean, Omni?” Baro asked in his rumbling bass.

“It means our friend is far more than he appears,” Maris answered as he leaned against the wall, and cleaned his nails with a dagger. Upon his back was Masamune, the legendary blade. The stories said it had seen endless blood and couldn’t be shattered.

Another spoke, Hiron, the one on the balls of his feet. His trademark dual daggers sat at either hip. Gray knew their names well—Calad and Láidir. “Te dá theobh le gech scéal,” Hiron whispered, then spoke aloud, “Then this also means the Traitor is truly not the rightful bearer of the sword.”

“We cannot presume that yet,” another replied—Aundevoria̋. He stood next to his taller brother, Aurelious. Aundevoria’s famed sword, Durendil, sat on his back, its wire-wrapped handle protruding over his shoulder. The stories formed in Gray’s mind, and he found himself watching it all in mute disbelief, as if it were a dream.

“It is the only thing we can assume! He is no longer a Ronin. His betrayal made that clear,” Seth replied, striding forth.

Gray recognized him as the one from the shadows—the one that wanted him tortured. While most of the Ronin were tall, Seth was

taller. Each wore colored vests of subtle hues, what he remembered the stories called a haori; Maris' was forest green, Aundevoria̋'s the color of slate, Dared's black as night, Omni's silver, Hiron's white like snow, Baro's a dark, steely gray, Aurelious' was flesh-colored, and Seth's haori was a fiery red. His vest matched the blood-red sword at his hip called Heartgard. Seth, the Firebrand, he recalled. The rest of each the Ronin's attire was dark earth tones, blending with the shadows.

"The boy may be lying," Hiron said.

"You don't have to believe me, but I'm not lying," he replied. He looked to Darius, hearing the rogue's labored breaths. "I told you what you wanted to know, as promised, now leave us be."

Omni spoke, watching him, "He speaks the truth, but the extent of it is still a mystery. We can, for the moment, assume Kail is not in control of the sword. As a result, it seems he is no longer our leader." A gamut of emotions flickered across the other Ronin's faces, too varied and convoluted for Gray to decipher. "That he no longer binds us would explain why I have not felt his presence for over a year."

Maris spoke, "That explains the emptiness I sense."

"I've sensed it too. We all have. But what about the boy?" Baro asked, rolling his massive shoulders.

"Kill him," said Seth, raising his sinuous blade—a red flame ran across Heartgard's surface. "He is no use."

Fear shot through Gray. He stepped back, searching for a way out but the Ronin surrounded him from all sides. Squaring his shoulders, he stood his ground. He would fight with every morsel of his being if he had to, though he did not think it would be a long fight.

Maris unsheathed his dual blades from his back and the ring of steel filled the alley. "You were already advised against that path, Seth. Do not press your luck."

“Keep quiet, Maris,” Seth snapped. “If I have to watch your back from the Kagehass and scout for the traitor, I might just choose to drop one of those responsibilities.”

“Careful, Seth, you’re sounding like him now,” Baro rumbled, stepping forward.

Omni spoke calmly, silencing the bickering legends, “The boy is useful. And we do not kill innocents, Seth. If I am forced to repeat myself, I will be very displeased.”

Seth’s lip curled in disdain, but he fell silent.

“Then what now, Omni?” Maris asked eagerly, sheathing his blades. His fingers flitted at his side—the man’s infamous habit.

Omni looked away in thought, while the others watched, equally expectant, including Gray. “More answers and only more questions,” the Ronin whispered. Omni looked up at last. “We take the boy. Leave the other one—he serves no purpose and may only be hurt.”

“I’m not coming,” said Gray, standing beside Darius, “I’m staying with him.” In a sudden flash, Omni disappeared. Gray flinched. In the same instant, he reappeared, an inch away from Gray’s face. Now, his eyes within his white mask were orbs of blue fire. “You will come, or your friend will die. Those are your choices.”

Gray returned the glare. “I thought you didn’t kill innocents,” he said, mustering his voice.

“Not unless I have to,” Omni answered.

At last, he looked away. “What am I to do?”

“You have been hiding one last thing.” Omni glanced to Gray’s hand. “Your hand has been itching to touch a sword ever since we arrived. I believe the sword you do not have, is the same one we seek. Take us to the sword, Gray.”

“Someone approaches,” Hiron said abruptly.

True enough, an echo sounded in the alley—footsteps on wet stone. Omni grabbed Gray and dragged him to the alley's wet walls. Gray watched as the other Ronin disappeared before his eyes, shifting into the shadows.

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Ayva opened the back door of the inn.

The cart sat in ruins, broken barrels littered the ground, and red wine ran through the cracks of the cobbled street. She growled beneath her breath. She should have known. Trouble always came in threes. Once the wise, twice the fool, thrice the blind, she quoted.

"I heard voices," she called. "I know you're out there!" Silence. Why are they not showing themselves? They didn't seem like thieves. Surely it was just an accident. She spoke again, trying to hide her fear. "Gray? Are you out there?"

"Ayva?" A voice called, stepping forward and a face materialized from the shadows.

"Gray, thank the heavens!" she said with a breath of relief. "I knew someone was here. Why didn't you respond? You scared me out of my right mind!" Then she paused and fixed him with a hard look. "What happened here?"

He grabbed her shoulders and she flinched. "Ayva, go back into the inn, right now!"

"Gray, you're scaring me. What are you talking about?"

"There's no time to explain! Listen, go now, it's not safe here!"

Anger rose inside her. "Where's Darius? If this is some kind of sick ruse then you can just—" The clouds shifted, and she saw a body in the shadows. "Darius!" She ran to the rogue's side, falling to her knees. "What happened? What's wrong with him?" She touched the rogue's head of unruly hair. It was wet. She gasped.

Gray pulled her to her feet. "Darius is fine, I promise! He's only

unconscious, but if you don't leave soon..." He cut short as the nearby shadows moved again. Ayva tensed, as others stepped out of the darkness.

Eight men... She tried to form words, but nothing came out.

"It's too late, Gray," said a figure wearing a white shroud. "She stays."

Distantly, Gray said something at her side, but Ayva didn't hear as a man cloaked in black and red with a scarlet sword, flashed a demonic grin. A sudden dark light came to his eyes and his blade roared alive, hissing red flames.

"Ronin..." Ayva whispered in a cracked voice and fell into darkness.

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With the Ronin at his side, Gray moved through the alleyways. The alley was dark and quiet, lit only by a wax-colored moon high above. The moon scuttled amid clouds, as if trying to hide. Gray understood that sentiment. He waited to run into a townsperson; waited for the shrieks of terror as a man or woman turned the corner to find the Ronin, nightmares of mankind, striding down the dark alley, but strangely they met no one. Instead, the alleys were empty. He judged they were closer to the outskirts of the town now, and some ways from the festivities of the center green. The quiet streets seemed unnatural. The figures that strode beside him with deadly grace didn't seem to notice.

He wondered if a person did appear if they wouldn't simply kill them. Legendary slayers of men, he thought with disdain.

"You shouldn't worry for your friends so much," Omni said at his side, as if reading his thoughts.

Gray kept his voice low, but couldn't keep the heat from it. "Why did he do that to Ayva?" he said, glancing to Maris. The man paid him no heed, moving like a wolf in the shadows.

"Your friend will awake. If she had cried out and attracted unwanted attention, then you would have true cause to worry.

Besides, this way, she is safe and far from harm." The Ronin stared straight ahead as they maneuvered through the dusky street. "In a few hours, both she and Darius will wake up with only a bump, and a memory of something they won't believe."

"We're here," he said at last, turning to the Ronin. Before them was a guard tower he had seen on the way in. It was a high-roofed building of white stone that hugged the town's wall.

"So the sword is in there?" Maris asked.

"I'd assume so. That's the only tower I've seen, and that's where he said they were taking the blade, to the tower. So, what's your plan? I'm pretty sure it's guarded."

"Well, we're just going to saunter up and ask them in a sweet voice if we can have it," Maris answered.

He scowled. The man was beginning to get on his nerves.

Omni grumbled beneath his cloth mask. "Get on with it, Dared."

Dared was so utterly silent, Gray had forgotten that the last Ronin was even with them. Tall and handsome, with thin lips and dark, emotionless eyes, Dared looked truly the description of a man lost in immortality. He threw down his pack and Gray noticed his cloak and its insignia. Two crescents of a moon united in a circle, one part light, and the rest dark. Kingdom of the Moon. Dared riffled through his pack and pulled out a coiled strand of rope and something metal that had three rods of steel.

Gray leaned in curiously. "What is that?"

"A kri hook," Maris explained, sounding as if it should be obvious. He took it from Dared and flicked his wrist, and two of the flat metal rods flipped up on invisible silent hinges. They locked in with a click. With one arm, Maris lobbed the hook. It landed in a crenel in the battlements at the top of the roof, thirty paces up.

"Up you go," Omni said to Gray and motioned up the wall.

"Aren't you coming? Can't you get it easier yourselves?"

Maris laughed, “And risk our own hides?”

Omni looked to Maris and the man cut short his laughter.

“If we’re discovered we’ll have a whole city in an uproar. If you’re found stealing your sword back, it’ll only be mischief,” Omni explained. “We’ll keep the alley safe for your return.” And make sure I don’t run away, Gray thought.

He turned, barely believing what he was doing, grabbing the rope, and he climbed hand over hand. When he reached the top, he looked back down. The Ronin had vanished.

A stone turret sat upon the roof, looking over the town of Lakewood like a sentinel. Gray slowly crept up to the watchtower, staying low, and peeked over the lip of the stone. The turret was empty. Climbing inside, he found a ladder. It led down and into the guard’s hut.

What in the seven hells? He wondered again. First the stories come to life, and now I’m about to risk my life for them? But the sword was his, and he wanted it back. He paused upon the tower, looking out, knowing they were out there somewhere, watching.

Then, with a deep breath, he descended.

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